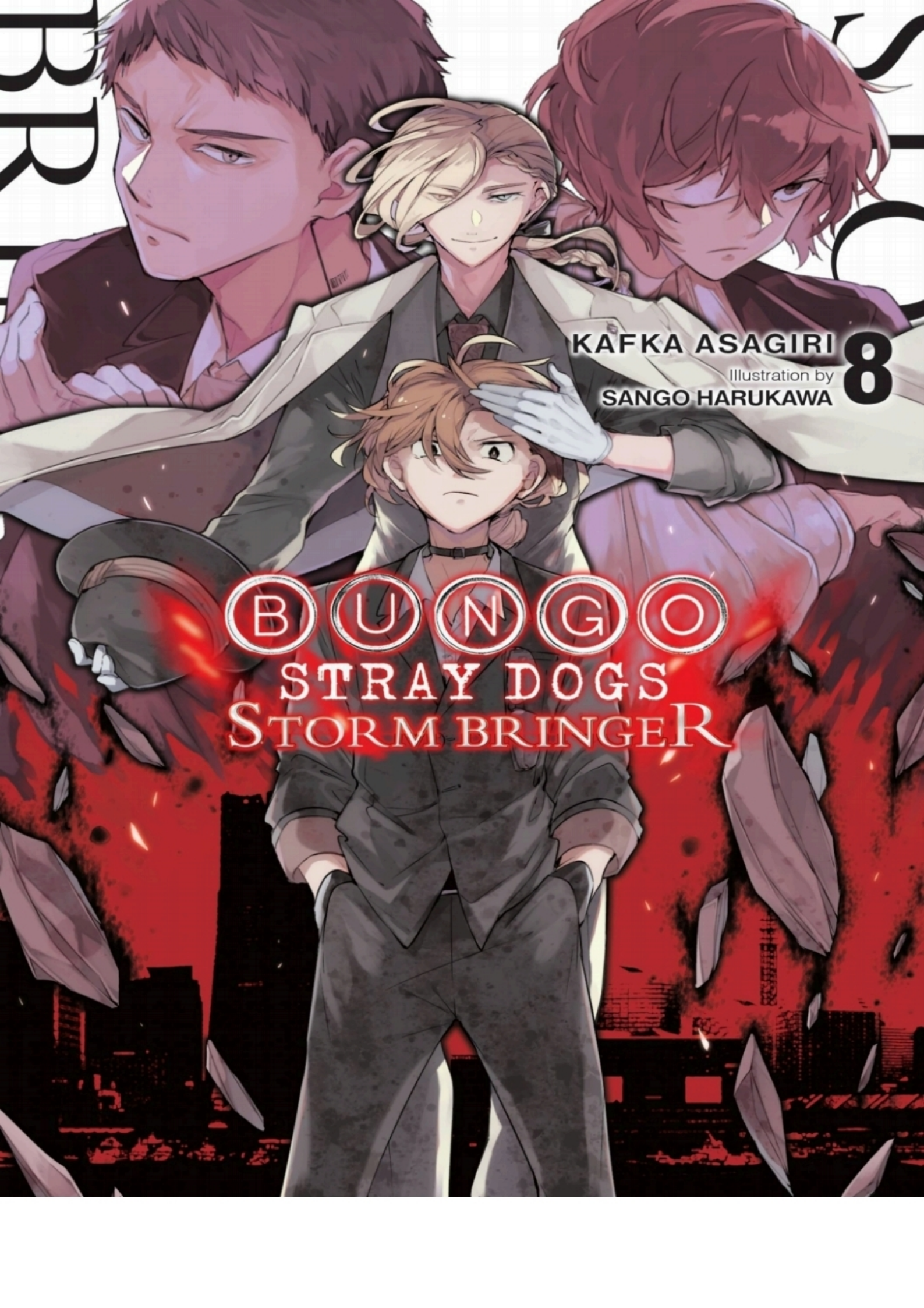




KAFKA ASAGIRI

Illustration by

SANGO HARUKAWA

8

BUNGO
STRAY DOGS
STORM BRINGER

BUNGO
STRAY DOGS
STORM BRINGER







"You're
late,
my dear
brother."

The
169th
outcome.

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B U N G O

STRAY DOGS

STORM BRINGER



KAFKA ASAGIRI

ILLUSTRATION BY

SANGO HARUKAWA

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

Bungo Stray Dogs, Volume 8
KAFKA ASAGIRI

Translation by Matt Rutsohn
Cover art by Sango Harukawa

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BUNGO STRAY DOGS Vol. 8 STORM BRINGER

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On Life's vast ocean diversely we sail,
Reason the card, but Passion is the gale.

—Alexander Pope, “An Essay on Man”

Prologue

The nighttime forest veils wickedness.

No matter the country or era, there was never a time when evil didn't lurk in the woods at night. The form it takes, however, is always changing. One night, it could emerge as a darkness so thick you might not even be able to see your own two feet. And on other nights, it could turn your path home into a seemingly endless maze. It could even be the fangs and saliva of a starving beast.

This forest's wicked form that day was *light*.

An orange light. An ominous luster wiggling to the beat of a song that couldn't be heard.

Fire.

A hole in the night that all living creatures naturally feared: a forest fire.

The crackling of the trees as they burned sounded like guttural screams.

Fires are not fussy like people. They devour everything in their path without a single complaint, slowly fattening themselves up with wickedness.

This forest would likely be reduced to mundane black ash by sunrise. That was how the forest was going to die. It would be a good hundred years or so until it came back. The culprit—the one who dealt the final blow—was lying at the center of the flames.

It was the remains of a passenger airplane. The engine's fans were still spinning—proof it had crashed just a short while ago. The body was bent straight down the middle, and one of its wings stuck out of the ground like a gravestone.

Nearby villagers began gathering to put out the fire and rescue any survivors, but their faces were immediately tinged with despair. No one could have survived this crash. The aircraft's torn body had been blackened

by the heat; the metal craft painfully shrieked. It appeared that the fire had already made its way inside. Simply walking through the cabin would surely melt one's shoes into the floor within seconds.

Overcome with hopelessness, the villagers started examining what was left of the aircraft. Then a boy approached the wreckage. He was from a nearby village and had a hatchet for felling lumber in his hands; he'd brought it with him to chop down however many trees it took to keep the fire from spreading. A mere child like him, however, could only attempt to mimic what the adults were doing. His tiny hatchet wasn't even sharp or sturdy enough to chop down his grandfather's bonsai tree.

Nevertheless, the young boy approached the downed aircraft. There might be survivors. The adults would surely praise him if he saved someone. He imagined himself being lauded a hero, and his heart began to race.

But his ambitions proved deadly. One of the iron doors, which somehow managed to remain attached to the wreckage, let out a metallic *clank* before snapping off and flying straight toward the boy. Nobody present would have been able to make it in time to save him, even if they tried. This was a heavy, sturdy door rapidly descending from a high altitude. A villager screamed as the door crushed the child's head like putty—

—or at least, that was what everyone thought was going to happen.

A hand grabbed the iron door, stopping it. But it wasn't a villager's hand. It belonged to someone within the aircraft.

"Is this the place? Finally," that person said calmly.

A tall man wearing a blue business suit appeared. He was European, but his age was hard to place; he was most likely in his twenties or thirties. His gaze was distant in spite of the roaring flames surrounding him. Unlike the devastated aircraft from which he'd emerged, he didn't have a scratch on him.

"I had no idea commercial airplanes experienced so much turbulence when they landed. But as they say: Everything is an experience, and experience is everything. Are you okay?" he asked the boy. "No need to thank me. Saving and protecting humans is my duty. At any rate, you're bound to get hurt hanging around a place like this. It doesn't help that these doors just seem to pop off, either."

"Huh...?"

While the child's eyes rolled back, the man in blue hopped out of the airplane and landed on the ground before slowly checking his surroundings.

"Hmm. This was not in my external memory database. Do all airports in Japan have this many trees? Now, I understand that sixty-seven percent of this country's total land area is forested, but choosing to build an airport here seems a bit illogical. There aren't even any roads. I suppose that means I will have to head to my destination on foot. Humans make absolutely no sense to me sometimes."

The man wore a serious expression as he dubiously cocked his head to one side.

"Um...s-sir..., " the boy mumbled timidly. "Just who are you...?"

"Ah, my apologies. Human society considers it rude to not introduce oneself, yes?" The man slipped a black badge out of his breast pocket. The boy couldn't read the silver text in the center.

"I am a detective, property of Europol. My model number is 98F7819-5. I was created by skill user engineer Dr. Wollstonecraft and am the first autonomous humanoid supercomputer for law enforcement use. My code name is Adam—*Adam Frankenstein*. It was a pleasure meeting you. Now, if you will excuse me, I have a mission to attend to."

The young man bowed and began to leave until he came to a sudden stop.

"Oh, right," he said, glancing over his shoulder. "Do you know someone by the name of Chuuya Nakahara?"

[CODE:01] Nothing more than 2,383 lines of code some researchers wrote off the top of their heads

Chuuya Nakahara didn't dream. For him, waking up was like a bubble emerging from within mud.

Chuuya awoke in his bedroom. It was a dreary room: just four walls, a floor, and ceiling all drenched in bluish darkness. The furnishings were extremely sparse: a bed with some sheets, a small bookshelf, a tiny safe built into the wall, a desk at the center, and a book about precious stones tossed atop it opened to a random page. That was everything.

The morning sun peeked in through a slit in the curtains like a membrane splitting the dreary room in half. Chuuya sat up, his chest coated in a faint sheen of sweat. Swirling within his chest were the remnants of some intense emotion, although he couldn't remember *what* emotion, exactly. He'd been like this every day as of late.

Chuuya gave up trying to remember and left his bedroom to take a shower. He thought about who he was while the hot water poured down his body.

Chuuya Nakahara. Sixteen years old.

After joining the Port Mafia a year ago, he made a name for himself with unprecedented speed. The organization recognized this young man's talents and thereby granted him this apartment. And yet Chuuya had no interest in money or power. They brought him no happiness because he was missing something far more important: a past.

He didn't know who he was.

Chuuya's earliest memories were of when he was abducted from the military research facility nine years ago. His life before that was just a curtain of darkness—pitch-black emptiness darker than the darkest night.

After drying off, Chuuya went to change. He placed a hand on the wall, and it opened without making a sound, revealing a clothing rack. Every

article of clothing was high-end without a wrinkle in sight. He picked a shirt at random, slipped his arms through the sleeves, then fastened them with emerald cuff links. Once dressed, Chuuya looked at himself in the mirror and lightly clicked his tongue before leaving the room.

When he left the building, a car instantly pulled up as if it knew he was coming. A man from the Port Mafia dressed in a black suit and sunglasses was driving the black luxury car. He stopped by Chuuya's side and opened the rear door for him without saying a word.

"The usual place."

That was all Chuuya said to the driver before getting in the car, sitting down, and closing his eyes.

The black luxury vehicle drove smoothly through the heart of the city using the main thoroughfare. Every street and intersection was packed with commuters driving to work, but the Port Mafia car slipped past the traffic via side roads. It was as if they'd cast a spell that kept the other cars out of their way.

"Where are yesterday's transaction records?"

"Right here."

Chuuya skimmed the documents the driver handed him. They were printed using a special ink that made them impossible to copy or reproduce, plus they were written in code to prevent the police from using them as evidence if they ever got their hands on them.

"Looks like we're having another good week," Chuuya said apathetically. "What a drag."

His job in the Port Mafia was to monitor the circulation of smuggled jewels. Per unit weight, jewels were some of the most valuable goods in the world. Amethysts, rubies, jade, diamonds: Expose a few elements to heat and pressure, and the resulting stones possess an incredible kind of magic the moment they begin changing hands. Smuggled jewels simply possessed a condensed version of said magic. They were like the shadows created by the brilliant glitter of gemstones. As long as there were jewels to be sold, stolen ones would follow. And there were countless shadowy places where

contraband gemstones sprang to life.

A poverty-stricken miner in a gem-mining district would steal precious stones for a little extra cash. A burglar would break a jewelry store display with his gunstock before leaving with the goods. Then there were pirates who'd sink merchant boats carrying precious stones and loot them. Sometimes criminals would even mug celebrities and rip the necklaces right off their necks. In gem-mining districts run by anti-government forces, precious stones could even be used to purchase weapons or drugs.

Precious stones born from such darkness could not live in the world of light. That was where the Port Mafia came in and bent a few rules. First, they would shed light on all the shadowy stones that arrived at port in Yokohama; a smuggler would then bring the gems into Yokohama proper where a pawnshop would buy them before passing them over to a professional who cut them so nobody could verify where they came from. Necklaces became bracelets, bracelets became earrings, and earrings became rings, giving the gemstones a second life. The new stones were then appraised by a Mafia-backed appraiser who would make an official certificate of authenticity for each one before they were circulated to the wholesalers and sold at high-end jewelry shops.

The smuggling of precious stones was an extremely lucrative business and important source of income for the Mafia. Bypassing customs and intermediaries within mainstream distribution channels resulted in massive profits. Nevertheless, these magical stones always led to violence and bloodshed, and the only thing that could stop this violence and maintain a stable system was even more violence.

Chuuya had been filling this role perfectly as of late—almost *too* perfectly. Even many old-timers in the Mafia were impressed, since there wasn't a single soul who thought a sixteen-year-old kid could manage a black market for gemstones with such ease. Yet others—although few in number—weren't surprised in the least: those who had fought the Sheep when Chuuya was their leader. Chuuya, the Sheep King, had crushed any Mafia member who'd gotten in his way; there was nothing strange about him mastering a couple of jewelry markets. But he didn't care about anyone's surprise, or praise, or even envy. The one thing he wanted was something they could never give him.

Chuuya half-heartedly tossed the documents onto the seat next to him as

if he were throwing a pebble.

“Who knows how many more years it’s gonna take at this rate,” he griped somewhat bitterly.

The driver pretended not to hear.

The luxury car arrived at the tranquil residential area right on time. Other than the cawing greenfinch flying low, the area was utterly silent—no trains or cars within earshot. The Mafia car quietly drove down the street until it stopped in front of one particular establishment. This brick building housed an old pool hall, and the sign outside read OLD WORLD in faded letters. The neon lights weren’t turned on, since the place wasn’t open yet.

Chuuya got out of the car, and the car left just as quietly so as not to disturb the peaceful location. He opened the door to the pool hall...

...and was met with five guns.

“We ain’t open yet,” a man growled as he pressed a handgun to Chuuya’s head.

“We’ll let corpses inside, though,” said another man. He had a sawed-off shotgun at Chuuya’s chest.

“Pretty careless to come alone, Jewel King. Wouldn’t you say?” sneered yet another man, his gun aimed at Chuuya’s side.

“Not even you would be able to block every single one of our attacks in this position,” commented another man with his pocket pistol pressed up against the back of Chuuya’s neck.

“So what’s it gonna be, Gravity Boy? I promise I’ll make it quick and painless if you start crying and apologize now,” taunted the last of the five men. This one was standing right in front of Chuuya with a long-barreled gun pointed right between his eyes.

Chuuya was deadlocked. If he attacked any one of them, the others would immediately open fire. If he tried to retreat back out the door, he would be shot from the front. If he took a step forward, he would be shot from behind.

Chuuya didn’t react. His expression didn’t even change. The tension was

thick enough to cut with a knife as five index fingers tightened around their triggers.

Bang!

A hollow blast echoed through the street.

Chuuya stood stock-still as numerous bloodlike streams slid down his head—from multicolored party streamers.

“Happy one-year Port Mafia anniversary, Chuuya!”

The pool hall rang with the five men’s cheerful shouts. Chuuya looked around the room with an annoyed glare.

“...What is *wrong* with you people?”

White smoke was still coming out of their guns. Chuuya’s head was covered in colorful streamers, and confetti was still raining from above. The men grinned at the sight of Chuuya decked out in party goods.

The five of them were members of a peer support group within the Port Mafia. And not just any ordinary support group—they were the future of the organization, all either the same rank as Chuuya or higher. Every member was under twenty-five years old, which was why they were referred to as the Young Bloods—the young wolves of the Port Mafia.

After heaving a deep sigh, Chuuya walked toward the back of the pool hall with a distant expression, not even greeting any of the attendees.

“What’s wrong, Chuuya? Aren’t you happy?” asked the tall man behind him. “We did all this for you, y’know.”

“Who celebrates one-year anniversaries? Ridiculous,” Chuuya scoffed. “I’m not *not* happy. I’m indifferent.”

“C’mon, don’t be like that. You’re gonna like it. I guarantee it,” the tall man assured Chuuya as he followed him. “We’ll even be presenting you with a little anniversary gift or two later. Isn’t that exciting? Feels just like being in school again, right?”

Chuuya suddenly stopped, looked back, and glared at the man. “So you’re the one behind all this, Piano Man? You have the lamest sense of humor.”

“What can I say? I live for moments like this. Annoying people with my lame sense of humor is what gets me out of bed every morning.”

The mafioso, wearing a formal black coat and white slacks, beamed at Chuuya's bitter remark.

Known within the Port Mafia as Piano Man, he dressed in black and white without exception. He was tall with slender fingers and always wore an amused smile. Piano Man was the Young Bloods' founder and essentially served as its leader; plus, he'd originally invited Chuuya to join the group.

Piano Man was more of a craftsman than a mafioso, and he was most likely the only person in Yokohama who could create counterfeit money—known as supernotes—indistinguishable from the real thing. However, he could also be quite fickle, missing deadlines by months if the counterfeit notes didn't meet his standards, even if doing so went against the boss's orders.

Incidentally, he wasn't nicknamed Piano Man because of his black-and-white attire. His weapon of choice was an automatic winding machine fitted with carbon steel piano wire. Once the wire was around his enemy's neck, they were decapitated within seconds. No amount of brute strength could save them. All that would be left was a perfectly flat surface between their shoulders, copious amounts of blood, and the echoes of the victim's final scream. This was a man of whimsy, delicacy, and cruelty, said to be the youngest mafioso closest to becoming a Port Mafia executive.

Just when Chuuya started walking into the back of the pool hall once more, another man called out to him.

"Ha-ha-ha! Chuuya, you shoulda seen your face! I was all for this little act, too, just in case you were curious! The star of the Young Bloods and former Mafia enemy: Chuuya Nakahara, the Sheep King! Just seeing that pissed-off look on your face made joining this group worth it!" said a blond young man with a vibrant laugh as he twirled his shotgun.

Chuuya glared at him. "Hmph. You're lucky I realized it was all an act, Albatross. 'Cause if I didn't, you'd have been the first one to die."

"Whoa there. Sorry, but you wouldn't be able to kill me. I'd slice off your hand with this here blade before you'd even manage to land a hit."

Then the blond youth soundlessly pulled a kukri machete out of his coat. He cut through the air a few times with weightless speed before simply letting it go. The blade immediately pierced the floor with a heavy *thud*, leaving radial cracks where it landed.

The blond youth laughed. He often laughed with a cheerful look on his face, which was where he got the nickname Albatross. A talkative individual, Albatross was prone to getting carried away. Even in the middle of battle with blood and guts flying through the air, his subordinates never lost sight of him because all they ever had to do was follow his voice and laughter.

Albatross was said to have complete control over “anything that’s faster than walking.” Put simply, vehicles were his game. Whether it was trucks for transporting goods or a cargo ship that could slip past the coast guard’s radar, he was your man. He could even have a getaway car with a fake license plate ready if the situation called for it. Albatross was originally the Mafia’s wheelman, capable of piloting anything with a steering wheel more quickly and with greater precision than anyone else. There were even rumors that he once got away from the coast guard’s high-speed attack helicopter in an old, beat-up fishing boat, and not a single person in the Mafia doubted those rumors. Anyone who made him mad wouldn’t survive three days in the Port Mafia because he controlled the vehicles—in other words, he controlled the cash flow. If he hated someone, he could shut down their business and leave them with nothing in the blink of an eye.

“Hey, Chuuya, let’s make a toast!”

Albatross caught up with Chuuya and held out a champagne glass, but Chuuya only gave him a brief glance before continuing to walk away.

“Yikes, someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed today,” said Albatross. He held the champagne glass up in an exaggerated motion as if to prevent it from spilling. “We’re used to you randomly being in a bad mood once every month or so, but I gotta ask: Did something happen? A bad dream, maybe?”

A bad dream.

The instant he heard those words, Chuuya turned around, furious.

“*Nothing* happened!”

His rage violently shook the glasses in the pool hall.

“Sheesh, don’t scare me like that... So? What’s going on?”

After a brief moment of hesitation, Chuuya’s eyes wandered around the room until he lowered his voice slightly and said, “Day after day, you’ve been goin’ on night-long benders right above me, Albatross. *That’s* what’s going on. How many times do I have to tell you that your floor is my

ceiling?”

“Aw, c’mon, I haven’t forgotten. I make sure to be extra noisy *because* I know you’re down there, neighbor.” Albatross smiled innocently.

He lived in the same high-end apartment building as Chuuya but on the next floor up. As far as Chuuya was concerned, putting Albatross on the floor above him was one of the biggest mistakes the Port Mafia had ever made. Albatross would sometimes invite himself into Chuuya’s apartment on a whim and drag him along somewhere, saying he needed help with a job. Then they would take a car, boat, or even a helicopter to some ridiculously faraway war zone. Chuuya became a really good swimmer thanks to this, since Albatross wouldn’t always have a vehicle ready to take them back home.

Chuuya ignored Albatross and continued toward the back of the pool hall. He was about to hang up his coat when a man with a champagne glass suddenly appeared by his side.

“Heh-heh... Happy one-year anniversary, Chuuya...,” the man said, chuckling. His bangs, cut in a perfectly straight line, concealed his dark gaze upon Chuuya. “I never expected you to last this long... Heh-heh.”

He was unusually skinny. His thin wrists seemed to hover between the cuffs of his collared shirt; the hand not holding a champagne glass was clutching onto a drip stand with an IV bag whose tube disappeared into his clothing. He looked extremely unwell, to put it lightly.

“Doc.”

Chuuya accepted the champagne glass handed to him, then peered inside it.

“You didn’t poison this, did you?”

“Not at all.” The man called Doc smirked grimly. “Poison wouldn’t be enough to kill you.”

“How do you know that?”

“From experience.” His eyes glowed eerily. “I’ve killed many with poison.”

Doc, the personification of unhealthy, was the Mafia’s medical supervisor. There were a lot of unlicensed quacks in the criminal underworld, but Doc was different. He was an actual doctor who got his MD in North America.

So-called back-alley doctors were highly sought after in underground

society, since legitimate hospitals reported anyone who came in with wounds from torture or gunshots to the authorities. That was where these underground doctors came in, and the Port Mafia was no different.

But the similarities with other criminal organizations ended there. Doctors were highly valued in the Port Mafia and given preferential treatment. Ougai Mori, the Mafia boss, was a former back-alley doctor himself, after all. Furthermore, Doc was a top-class physician even among his extraordinary peers in the organization's medical division. He had already saved around eight hundred lives, despite his youth. And he had purposely robbed about that many lives, too.

Doc's goal was to bring himself one step closer to God. He personally believed that every life saved brought him that much closer to his goal. He aimed to save around two million people—the same number of people that God killed in the Bible. That was why he joined the Mafia, where he calmly waited for a massive war that would see countless people die like insects.

"What a lineup. Honestly wasn't expecting to see you here, too, Doc," Chuuya admitted as he looked around the hall. "Why the hell was everyone invited here just for a one-year anniversary, though?"

"Allow me to explain."

A young man with a kind voice slowly approached him.

"It's because the first year in the Mafia is the hardest."

"What?"

The man smiled. It was a very sweet, attractive smile, perhaps thanks to his unusually handsome face. His captivating beauty was unparalleled. If he dressed in men's clothing and smiled, women would be swept off their feet; the same would happen to men if he dressed in women's clothes.

"That first year after joining the Mafia is the harshest period. It's a dead man's curve, so to speak. Within the first year, most people either run away, get killed on the job, or get snuffed out by the organization for causing problems. That's why today is a day to celebrate your survival."

"Heh. What? Didn't think I was gonna make it, Lippmann?" asked Chuuya as he glared at him.

"Oh, no. *I* knew you could do it," replied the man called Lippmann as he flashed Chuuya a captivating grin.

Lippmann's job was extremely peculiar, even compared to the others here. He was the Mafia's negotiator with the outside world. In other words,

he met with people in the “real” world. He negotiated with front companies, met and talked with political figures, and even dealt with the press if push came to shove. If the Port Mafia had a stage face, it would be him.

Killing Lippmann would be an extremely difficult task. In a way, he’d be even harder to kill than the boss himself...because Lippmann was a movie star. He had countless passionate fans abroad. If he was murdered or went missing, all the top news agencies worldwide would rush to cover it. A news story that massive would immediately have people everywhere searching for his killer, and that was something a criminal enterprise wanted to avoid at all costs.

Furthermore, Lippmann himself was an extremely powerful skill user with an ability that reacted to and countered an attacker’s thirst for blood. Therefore, it would be impossible to kill him without leaving behind any evidence.

If his killer’s name got out, every major news organization the world over would be chomping at the bit to expose the person’s history, motive, and who was backing them. Whatever organization ordered the hit would lose any privacy it once had, and that would spell its end. Murdering Lippmann was a death trap—a bomb that would go off the moment he died—hence why nobody had the guts to lay a hand on him.

His fame wasn’t his only weapon, either. He was a born actor with the gift of gab and impeccable negotiating skills, plus a beautifully chiseled face. Lippmann was especially good when it came to negotiations with people in the “real” world and solved most of them the moment he sat down at the table.

“In fact, I wouldn’t mind at all even if you were kicked out of the organization,” Lippmann added, his smile as gentle as a feather. “Because if that happened, I would welcome you to join me with my work. Together we could take on the world as actors on the silver screen.”

“I honestly can’t think of anything I’d want to do less.” Chuuya frowned bitterly, as if he’d swallowed poison. “In fact, that might be the worst idea I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“I was against throwing you a one-year anniversary party,” came a sudden, quiet voice from the back.

It wasn’t a yell; there was nothing intimidating about it, either. And yet everyone fell silent and looked in the direction of the voice. Standing there

was a man wearing very plain clothing.

“Iceman.” Chuuya spoke cautiously. “Yeah, not much for celebrations, are ya?”

The man never showed any emotion, no matter what. His presence seemed alien compared to the fiercer, flashier Young Bloods members. He didn’t come off as ambitious, nor did he leave much of an impression. If anything, he simply blended in with his environs like the quiet darkness of the night.

That was Iceman. The most senior member of the group after Piano Man, he was a quiet, expressionless individual who liked simple clothing. Even his work was extremely simple, especially in the Mafia. He was a hit man.

He didn’t use a skill to kill his target. He wouldn’t even use a gun. Iceman typically carried a knife on his person, but not even that was for work purposes. He always used something in the immediate vicinity: a pen, a bottle of booze, a lamp cord. The moment anything found its way into his hands, it became a deadly weapon, far more dangerous than a bullet. Hence why he could kill a person no matter where he was—whether it be a desert, a palace, or even a bank vault.

And Iceman had another extraordinary gift as well. He could feel it in his bones whenever someone used a skill near him. This wasn’t thanks to any special ability or technology. It was simply how his body worked. That was why he instinctively knew at a moment’s notice the best time and place to kill someone, and that made his kill ratio far higher than the average combat-type skill user. And it led the Mafia to put so much trust in him, too. Without a skill, neither the Special Division for Unusual Powers nor the military police’s Skilled Crime Task Force ever had him on their radar. No one got in his way. He was like a shadow. People in the Mafia believed that if anyone was to kill Chuuya, Iceman would be most likely to succeed.

“Wasn’t expecting you to come to a party for me, Iceman. I thought you hated me.” Chuuya flashed a provocative smile. “We went toe to toe once when I was still with the Sheep. Doesn’t help that you failed to assassinate me; bet that really hurt your rep.”

“I was against having a party, but not because I don’t like you. I don’t have any grudges, either. I just didn’t want to anger you for no good reason.” Iceman’s tone was flat and consistently unemotional. “We all knew

you'd make it past your first year."

"What?"

"We thought you were going to start a rebellion," Iceman continued, his voice sharp enough to split a glacier in two. "You used to be the leader of the Sheep—an opposing organization. We thought you were going to betray the boss, kill him, and start a war with the Mafia. So Piano Man invited you to join the Young Bloods to make sure that didn't happen."

Chuuya glanced at Piano Man, who was watching the exchange with a blank expression. He neither confirmed nor denied the allegation—which meant it was true.

"...Hmph. He did, eh?" Chuuya glared at the others. "No wonder everyone was being all nice to me, makin' sure I was okay, like I'm a newborn or something. I'm touched. You guys gave me toys, pacifiers, and rattles to keep me from getting upset. Well, I'm a big boy now thanks to you all. A big one-year-old boy. Now I see why you threw me such a big party."

He crushed the champagne glass in his hand, sending the liquid through the air. Iceman still didn't even blink.

"We had our reasons for being cautious," Iceman said. "July 18. It was 3:18 PM. One of the gemstone wholesalers angered you and suffered an injury that took three months to heal. All because he asked you a certain question. A simple, thoughtless question. But the moment you heard it, you threw him all the way to the roof of a three-story building."

"I did? Can't remember." Chuuya's gaze was sharp, unlike his tone of voice. "How 'bout you ask me that same question, then, so we can check? If you've got the guts, that is."

Iceman remained silent. He spent the next five seconds so expressionless that he might absorb all the emotion in the room, then replied:

"Where were you born?"

Chuuya immediately grabbed Iceman by the collar and violently pulled him close. The sound of fabric ripping followed as Iceman's shirt tore at the seams.

"What are you doing?" Iceman asked, still expressionless as he looked down at Chuuya's hands.

"That depends on you." Chuuya didn't loosen his grip.

“Hey, come on. That’s enough,” Albatross pleaded anxiously from Chuuya’s side, grabbing him by the arm. “Don’t let a li’l question like that anger you, Chuuya. That’s not you.”

“That’s for *me* to decide, damn it. I’ll kill him if I have to.”

Chuuya swiftly knocked Albatross’s hand away, causing Albatross to stumble backward. Chuuya tried to take a step forward, but he suddenly stopped. A cue stick was pressing right against his temple like the blade of a sword.

“What’re you plannin’ to do with that stick?” Chuuya asked without a shred of emotion on his face. He remained standing completely still.

“That depends on you,” Iceman replied, cue stick in hand.

Chuuya leaned his upper body away from the cue stick, then slammed his head back into it. Countless bits of wood flew through the air, and most pieces ended up raining down on Iceman himself; one sharp splinter sliced his right temple. Blood trickled down into the corner of his eye, but he didn’t even blink.

“That’s enough,” hissed the most cold-blooded voice in the room.

Out of nowhere, Piano Man was standing right behind Chuuya with a clear piano wire extending from the sleeve of his outstretched arm. It hung around Chuuya’s neck like an expensive necklace.

“Chuuya,” Piano Man said coldly. “No using skills on comrades.’ That’s the first rule of this group. Did you forget?”

Although it was called a piano wire, what Piano Man wielded wasn’t the same kind of string used in instruments. It wasn’t nearly that simple. This was industrial-grade wire strong enough to lift and carry iron or concrete blocks.

And deep inside Piano Man’s sleeve was a winding machine. Once it was activated, the piano wire transformed into the world’s lightest guillotine and sliced its target’s head clean off. Chuuya could manipulate gravity and make the piano wire lighter, but he wouldn’t be able to slow down the winding machine, which meant he wouldn’t be able to prevent himself from being decapitated.

“I get that you’re in a bad mood,” Piano Man added. “It’s because you’re gonna lose to Dazai at this rate. You have to become an executive before him. After all, the only reason you joined the Mafia was because you want access to a document that only executives can see, and that

document's the only way for you to find out who you really are."

Chuuya's expression transformed. "How did you know that?"

"But the way things are going, it's gonna take you another five years to become an exec."

Chuuya's brow furrowed deeply as he ground his teeth. "Don't you dare say another word."

"Sorry, but I will." Piano Man shot Chuuya a chilly smirk. "The boss told me almost everything."

"What?" Chuuya frowned with disgust.

"Right after I invited you to join the Young Bloods, the boss gave me orders to keep an eye on you. Told me to check if you got any new info or if you tried to sneak a peek at the Mafia's classified files."

"He asked you...to monitor me?"

Piano Man nodded. "Of course he did. If you didn't need to see the documents anymore, then you might've turned against him. You used to be enemies with the Mafia, after all. Obviously, he told me why you're after those documents, too. I was astonished, to say the least."

"Stop," Chuuya growled in a suppressed voice.

"Arahabaki. Prototype A2-5-8, an artificial skill created by the military. That's you. You're not even sure you're human. You're worried you might be nothing more than an artificial personality—and that's because *you don't dream.*"

Chuuya let out a voiceless growl.

It all happened in the blink of an eye. Chuuya had grabbed Piano Man's arm with his right hand like a snake snatching its prey, then crushed the automatic winder. He immediately picked up a fragment of the cue stick with his left hand and pointed it straight at Piano Man's throat.

The other four men were just as quick to react. Lippmann whipped out a submachine gun from within his coat and pointed it at Chuuya. Albatross's kukri machete was already touching Chuuya's wrist. Doc pulled out a syringe and had it pressed against Chuuya's temple. Iceman had picked up a broken champagne glass and was about to aim it at Chuuya's eye.

Everyone was still. Nobody lifted a finger. They even stopped breathing momentarily. It was like looking at a photograph; the only thing still moving was the dust glittering in the morning sunlight. Any one of the six could have taken a life with just the slightest movement—and yet nobody

stirred.

“Do it,” Chuuya demanded. His voice was like a bowstring pulled taut. “I don’t care which of you goes first. Just do it.”

“Can’t we do this later? At least, wait until the party’s over,” Piano Man said calmly.

“What?”

“I told you we were giving you a one-year anniversary gift or two, right?” He then took something out of his pocket. “Here.”

Chuuya cautiously lowered his gaze...and froze.

“.....Huh?”

With that utterance, he completely shut down. He didn’t seem to be breathing; it even looked like his heart had stopped. Chuuya’s grip loosened, and the broken piece of cue stick fell to the floor with a hollow *clack*. He unsteadily took what was being handed to him, apparently no longer focused on his surroundings.

It was a photograph.

“Weren’t expecting something so valuable, huh? I went through hell to get it for you.”

Chuuya drew his face closer to the photo as if he were in a trance. He couldn’t even hear Piano Man’s voice anymore. The others smirked uncomfortably as they put away their weapons, but Chuuya didn’t notice that, either.

“If anyone ever asks you that question again, just show ’em this picture.”

It was a photo of Chuuya when he was five years old.

It was taken at a beach somewhere; the ocean was visible in the background. Chuuya was wearing a linen *yukata* and holding hands with a young man while walking toward the photographer. The young man was smiling and faintly squinting from the sun’s bright rays. The young Chuuya was staring vacantly at whoever was taking the photo. From the look on his five-year-old face, he had no idea what was going on.

“The picture was taken at an old farming village out west,” explained Piano Man. “It’s a ghost town now, though. Nobody lives there anymore. But Doc struck gold after looking into some medical files being kept at another nearby village.” He paused. “Doc.”

“Heh-heh... People may lie, but dental records don’t.”

Doc came over with some files and a sickly smile.

“Medical professionals are obligated to keep medical records for a few years...and that obligation became our little ray of hope... Heh-heh...”

Puzzled, Chuuya looked back and forth between Doc and the files.

“Don’t act like you got those files all on your own, Doc!” Albatross whined as he held out another set of documents. “You never woulda gotten your hands on ’em if it wasn’t for me. Medical corporations usually end up being the ones that store medical records if a clinic goes under, and there’s tons upon tons of them! And guess who found the files we were looking for? Me! I threatened and begged every record keeper who seemed like they might’ve had these documents until I finally got ’em myself!”





“Of course, even the greatest explorer never reaches his destination without taking that first step,” Lippmann said with a gentle smile. He held out a different stack of documents. “I asked a lady I knew for a favor and received access to some of the government’s military files. Naturally, they immediately destroyed the most confidential files involving the research once the war ended, but I did discover that one military unit put out a call for body donations out west for use in human experimentation. That was our first clue. In other words, I contributed the most out of everyone here.”

As the situation slowly dawned on him, Chuuya timidly looked over at the final person in the group: Iceman.

“...I didn’t do anything special,” Iceman added before taking out the last set of documents. “I found records of your parents’ siblings, their family tree, where you went to school along with your grades and school photos. I found your birth records, too. Piano Man told me not to let the boss know we were looking into this, so I couldn’t go to an information broker. I had to sneak into eight different buildings myself to get these.”

“E-eight different buildings?”

Chuuya blinked in surprise while accepting the documents. Iceman nodded, then faintly smiled for the first time that day.

Very few people knew Iceman as a person, but he was actually quite soft-spoken and kind when he wasn’t on the job. He was simply a good-natured man who enjoyed coffee and listening to records in his spare time. Not many knew he had this side to him, but all five of the men here did. Chuuya looked at each of them in turn; they were all smiling.

Piano Man, Albatross, Doc, Lippmann, and Iceman: the Port Mafia’s cream of the crop.

“Why, though?” Chuuya looked at the photo. “You’re disobeying the boss by doing this.”

Keeping Chuuya’s history a secret was how the Port Mafia boss was keeping him shackled to the organization. He wouldn’t be able to betray them as long as this info was under wraps. Piano Man, however, simply shrugged.

“The boss gave me orders to keep an eye on you in case you learned the secret. He never told me to keep that secret from you, though.”

Chuuya stared hard at Piano Man in an attempt to understand what he really meant by that remark.

“Why?” A flash of uneasiness briefly colored Chuuya’s expression. “Why would you go through all this?”

“‘Why?’” Piano Man looked puzzled, as if the question didn’t make any sense. “I already told you why. Because we’re celebrating your one-year anniversary today.”

“But...”

“It’s nothing particularly serious,” said Lippmann. Baffled by Chuuya’s reaction, he eyed the rest of the group. “If we had to come up with a reason, though...”

The look on his face said this was the most natural conclusion:

“It’s because you’re our *friend*. Were things different with the Sheep?”

They had been. That was what Chuuya’s flustered expression was saying. Everyone in the Sheep depended on him. The contrary was unthinkable.

“How about you think about it like this, Chuuya.”

Lippmann spread his arms, his gaze softening.

“This isn’t a present. This is a *flag*. Ever since the days of ancient Rome, there has only been one reason to raise a flag: to tell people, ‘We are here, and we are the chosen ones.’ If any one of the six of us is ever in trouble, you remember that flag and gather under it. We’re counting on you.”

He then slightly tilted his head to the side.

“Heh-heh... What a wonderful speech,” said Doc. “That’s Lippmann for you... I have to wonder how many women have been fooled by that silver tongue of yours...” He almost seemed to be mumbling to himself.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Lippmann replied with an unbothered smirk. “Oh, right. This peer support group actually has an official name: the Flags. That’s where I got the metaphor from. Piano Man, the group’s founder, is the only one who remembers and uses the name, though.”

“The ‘Flags’?” Albatross appeared dubious. “Pretty sure this is the first I’m hearing about this.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t tell me you forgot. I told you this on your first day in the group. Right, guys?”

Piano Man looked at the others, but nobody even blinked.

“Hold up. Did you seriously all forget? It took me three whole months to come up with the name.”

Everyone averted their gaze. Only Chuuya was quietly focused on the photo in his hand as if all the answers were right there. As if the existence of the photo itself was the answer, not the people in it.

“Happy one-year Mafia anniversary, Chuuya!” the group cheered.

For the briefest moment, Chuuya wore a childlike expression as if he didn’t know what to do or how to respond. He looked at his comrades, then through the files, then at himself in the photo once more.

“What’s wrong?”

Piano Man’s voice pulled Chuuya back to reality.

“Rrgh...!”

He tried to look angry. He opened his mouth and attempted to yell something, but not a single thought came to mind. Everyone stared at Chuuya in puzzlement. He then swiftly turned around and shouted at the entrance:

“Now I get it!” His voice was unnecessarily loud. “You thought you could pull a fast one on me, showin’ me this so I’d get all weepy and apologize! That’s what’s goin’ on, isn’t it?!”

“Hmm? No, actually, we—”

“Well, it ain’t gonna work on me. Got it? That won’t work on me!”

Chuuya began storming toward the entrance and kept his head down.

“I’m goin’ home! And ya better not follow me! I don’t wanna see any of your damn faces!”

After Piano Man glanced at the others with a perplexed expression, he said to Chuuya, “Oh well. I guess if you’re leaving, you’re leaving. We were actually gonna have a billiards tournament after this, but...I guess we’ll just have to play without you.”

“Even without the guest of honor?” Lippmann raised an eyebrow.

“It’s out of our hands. We have all this nice booze we can’t let go to waste, so let’s cut loose and forget about work while we can. Whoever wins first place gets a prize!”

“That sounds wonderful.”

“Hey, Chuuya! Don’t mind us—and have a safe trip home!” Albatross waved at the entrance.

“Whatever!” barked Chuuya before kicking the front door open and leaving the pool hall. “Hmph.”

After the five comrades exchanged glances, they turned their gaze to the

door. Nobody said a word. Ten, then twenty seconds of silence went by. Still, nobody spoke up. Nobody even moved a muscle.

Thirty seconds went by. Right when they were about to reach the forty-second mark, the door to the pool hall opened just a crack.

“Screw you guys. Just tell me the rules, damn it. I’m takin’ all those stupid prizes back home with me!”

Chuuya was standing there looking equally frustrated and angry.

“Now we’re talking,” Piano Man said with a smile.

After that, the pool hall was full of its usual hustle and bustle: billiard balls clacking, the shuffling of footsteps, cheering, trash-talking, groaning, clinking glasses, billiard balls dropping into the pockets, and youthful laughter. The same mundane scene you’d see anywhere else in the world.

If everyone in the room pitched in, they could afford numerous plots of land in this town, but you’d never know that just by observing them. These young men were simply chatting like usual.

“Say, who ended up in last place the last time again?”

“You won’t be talking a big game for long.”

“We need more booze.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Yeah, the drunker you get, the more your aim sucks! You’re goin’ down!”

“True, the alcohol is making it hard to keep my hands stable. I’m probably gonna sink only three times as many balls as you.”

“Oh, it’s on!”

The pool hall was full of life. Someone started playing music on the jukebox. Old woodwind music could be heard in the background as the group played pool, drank champagne, and joked around. It was a scene from any corner of any old town; something that was universally wished for but wasn’t hard to achieve. That very something could disappear in the blink of an eye, just like bubbles in a champagne glass. This was one of those moments.

“Heh... This shot’s gonna win me this whole thing.”

“By the way, I saw you walking down by the harbor with a blond woman in tow. Is that your new girlfriend?”

“H-huh? ...Ack!”

“Yikes, this isn’t looking good.”

“Wow. Do you guys really wanna lose to me that badly?”

“Ack! Could the balls literally be in a worse spot?! Don’t make things easier for Chuuya! He’s already got a big enough ego as it is!”

“I have an ego?!”

“Just don’t let him win! Whoever’s next, you better not mess up!”

The stick connected with the cue ball perfectly. The follow shot’s spin twirled the white ball into a striped ball, knocking it into another numbered ball after that. The resulting combination shot hit one ball after another, each knocking themselves in a different direction. The colorful, energized balls wove complex geometrical patterns across the pool table.

“Whoa!”

Somebody gasped. The combo shot’s chain reaction, which was too intricate for the human eye to follow, continued until the final target—the yellow-and-white nine ball—began rolling toward one of the middle pockets.

The nine ball moved slowly as if it were taking in a deep breath...and fell into the pocket. A split second of silence followed, and then everyone erupted into cheers and applause.

“Incredible!”

“What was that?! You made that shot like a pro!”

“That was art.”

“Sorry, Chuuya. Looks like your championship run ends here.”

“A new king takes the throne!”

“Who made that shot anyway?”

Something bizarre had just happened. Startled, everyone started looking around to see who’d made that shot.

“Huh?”

Up until a few minutes ago, there were six people in the room...but now there were *seven*.

“No need to clap,” said the seventh man.

He wore a blue jacket and had long arms and legs; his dark-brown eyes perfectly complemented his black hair. His handsome face was very serious, almost to a fault as he held the cue stick like a ceremonial staff.

“I do not need any prize, either. My sole intention is to interact with the six of you and form a connection. The investigation manual stated that was

the best way to get information out of humans. And it appears we have bonded over our billiards game as planned, so I will now be focusing on the mission.”

The young man’s voice was flat and sonorous, his gaze seriousness itself. That moment marked the end of the peaceful tournament.

A kukri soared toward the young man’s neck with a fiery roar.

“Oh my.”

He tilted his head, effortlessly dodging the blade while it sliced the ends of his hair.

Albatross had thrown the kukri. Undeterred, he maintained his calm expression and sank low to the ground. Iceman then emerged behind the newcomer with a cue stick. He twisted his body like a spring before shooting forward like a bullet from a sniper rifle. The young man in blue easily evaded, so Iceman followed up with a barrage of thrusts with his cue stick. The tip of the stick grazed his opponent’s skin, scorched the hair on his head, and pierced the downy hair on his ears, yet none of the attacks were a direct hit. He’d avoided them by a mere whisker.

“I’m impressed,” said Iceman.

“Ha-ha-ha! This is fun!” Albatross cheered. “You must really have a death wish, coming in here without even knocking! Lemme grant that wish for ya!”

“Despite participating in a friendly game of billiards, it appears my targets of investigation are becoming increasingly aggressive. Your actions are illogical. Why are you doing this?”

The young wolves did not have an answer for him. Right as the newcomer was thrown off-balance from dodging the cue stick, Piano Man slipped behind him and started pulling a fine, glittering radial wire from his watch.

“You can finish making excuses once you’re down on the floor.”

The wire, which would be nearly invisible if it weren’t for the faint light reflecting off it, slowly fell and wrapped around the young man’s neck. Piano Man flicked his wrist, causing the wire to rapidly constrict by the winding device in his sleeve. Chuuya had destroyed just one of the winders in his sleeves, but Piano Man had devices up both. And once they started winding, the wires transformed into guillotines that not even superhuman strength could stop.

The young man instantaneously wedged the cue stick between his neck and the wire, but the winding piano wire snapped through the wood like butter before it was perfectly flush against the man's neck. All that was left was for the merciless wire to turn the man's shoulders into a flat table...and yet that didn't happen.

"What—?!"

The young man didn't try to dodge. He didn't even try to pull the wire off his neck. There was no need for him to because the piano wire was simply gliding around the surface of the man's skin. The winding device screeched as the wire dug into his neck, but that was all that happened. It didn't even leave a scratch.

"Stress in the exodermis contacts detected," the man noted with a blank expression. "Activating escape measures in accordance with designated self-defense routine."

He instantly spun to his side like a car wheel without any sort of windup. His leather shoes drew a perfect arch in midair as he spun so quickly and powerfully that he snapped the piano wire and destroyed the winder along with it. Fragments of the device were sent flying.

"Oh, now *that* is impressive," Piano Man said as he stepped back. "A combat-type skill, huh? I can see how you infiltrated Mafia property by yourself."

Everyone swiftly created distance between them and the man. Ordinary rules wouldn't work on a combat-type skill user, because unlike guns or knives, this kind of opponent was unpredictable. One miscalculation could lead to a quick death. The young mafiosi immediately began getting into their anti-skilled-opponent formation.

"Please wait. I did not come here to fight you," the young man implored the group before producing a black badge from his breast pocket. "My name is Adam. I am a Europole detective."

The atmosphere in the room suddenly changed.

"You're a cop?" Piano Man's smirk was as sharp as a knife. "Oh. Then I guess that means you were right, Adam. There *has* been a misunderstanding. It was a mistake on your part thinking that a cop could waltz in here and make it out alive! ...Lippmann!"

"Very well."

Lippmann pulled two machine pistols from his jacket, each spitting out

ten bullets per second with incredible speed. The man who introduced himself as Adam held up the back of his hand to block. Each 9 mm bullet that hit his hand ricocheted in a different direction.

“Impact detected! Rupture stress limits are at thirty-seven percent!” the detective shouted. “You are in danger of damaging an international investigator!”

“It looks like physical attacks really don’t work on him.” Piano Man calmly stared at him. “Lippmann, keep him busy. We’re gonna capture him instead.”

“Wait,” Iceman spat, cue stick in hand. “I don’t sense anything. That man...”

This was the first time Iceman’s face expressed astonishment that day.

“...doesn’t have any special powers!”

“What?”

Confusion skewed the six comrades’ faces...because what Iceman said couldn’t be possible. There was no way someone without a skill could snap Piano Man’s wire or deflect 9 mm bullets with his bare hands. That was like gravity working in reverse and causing the sun and moon to collide. But Iceman’s gut was never wrong.

The average person would have trouble holding out in battle when confronted with two completely contradicting situations. Most would devolve into chaos or flee the scene. These six mafiosi weren’t any ordinary people, though.

“Interesting.” Piano Man smirked. “Then let the game begin! Whoever beats this guy gets to be the talk of the town all next week! Everyone, you have permission to use your powers!”

“I don’t have to conceal my skill anymore? Very well.”

“Ha-ha-ha! That’s what I’m talkin’ about!”

“Heh-heh... Can’t wait to slice open his stomach.”

Numerous luminous spheres appeared out of nowhere. These fist-size orbs had neither heat nor weight. They began revolving around Adam like planets in a solar system.

That was when Adam stumbled.

“Oh?”

Adam’s leather shoe sank into the hard floor as if he were stepping into quicksand. The floor swallowed his foot and crumbled like sand; he

stomped the ground with his other foot to break free, but that foot slowly began sinking as well, causing him to instinctively place his left hand on the floor. That hand, of course, was soon submerged, too.

“Hmm...?”

Adam twisted his body and tried to grab onto one of the pool table’s legs, but something sprouted from the back of his hand. It was covered in elaborate scales and had a pointed birdlike head; rows of sharp fangs filled its mouth.

It was a dinosaur. A tiny dinosaur’s head was growing from the back of Adam’s hand like a plant.

“No relevant information available in the knowledge module.” Adam appeared dubious.

The dinosaur roared and lunged its jaw at Adam’s neck. He turned his head and managed to evade, but the motion threw him off-balance, causing him to be swallowed even farther into the ground.

“Another,” said a voice.

All of a sudden, another radial wire shot out of the ceiling, wrapped itself around Adam, then instantly began pulling him up until his body slammed against the ceiling. Beige sand scattered onto the floor; parts of the ceiling came crumbling down. Adam let out a pained groan, and the wire simultaneously vanished. Gravity then dragged him back down until he crashed into the floor, causing his body to once again be swallowed by the hellish quicksand-like flooring.

“Combat evaluation module unable to process current situation.”

Piano wire once again found its way around Adam’s neck.

“Coming in here alone against the six of us was a tremendous miscalculation on your part, detective,” taunted Piano Man with a cruel smirk. He happened to have a spare winding machine. “Not even God himself would last ten seconds against all of our skills at once. Anyway, here’s your last one-year anniversary gift, Chuuya. Feel free to break his arms and legs as you please.”

“Chuuya.” Adam’s expression changed the moment he heard that name. “I knew it had to be you.”

What happened after that ended in the blink of an eye. Adam purposefully shoved his right arm into the ground, causing the dinosaur to shriek before disappearing into the floor. The inertia from his right arm

allowed him to lift his left leg out of the quicksand and kick the nearby pool table, knocking the cue stick onto the ground. Adam scooped up the cue stick with his foot and kicked it upward without even glancing in its direction.

It spun in the air...and then he caught it with his left hand behind his back. After twirling the stick a few times, he slammed it into the quicksand, using the recoil to pull himself out of the floor.

“What is he, some kinda acrobat?!” Albatross shouted.

“Don’t let him move another inch!” Piano Man ordered.

Lippmann began rapidly firing his machine pistols. Adam twisted his body and dodged every bullet—each one missed him by a mere whisker. He flitted through the air, traversing the gunfire’s maze of death with minimal movement. Eventually, he landed on his feet right in front of Chuuya—the ground under the mafiosi was unaffected by the quicksand so as not to trap the six of them. Adam raised the cue stick in the air.

“Chuuya!” someone screamed.

And then...the cue stick dropped onto the floor.

“Chuuya.”

Adam got on one knee, lowered his head, and respectfully bowed as one would to royalty.

“I have come to protect you.”

“...Huh?”

Chuuya was bewildered. He looked down at the submissive European man with obvious suspicion.

“I was created by skill user engineer Dr. Wollstonecraft and am the first autonomous humanoid supercomputer in existence. My name is Adam Frankenstein, and I have come here to arrest the assassin who is after your life. The assassin’s name is Verlaine. Paul Verlaine.”

“‘Verlaine’?” Chuuya’s eyes opened wide the moment he heard that. “How do you know that name?”

“You know this guy, Chuuya?”

“An assassin?”

“Did he just call himself a computer?”

The five Flags were abuzz. Adam then stood back up with a serious look in his eyes and said:

“Chuuya, you cannot defeat Verlaine alone, which is why I was sent

here. He is no ordinary assassin. Paul Verlaine is the king of assassins—and your elder brother.”



Colorful, vivid spheres of light hovered in the air: red, orange, and dark green, each one orbiting at a different height.

“Incredible...,” muttered Albatross, overcome with surprise.

Adam was juggling billiard balls as if they were mere beanbags. Nine balls created different complex arches at different heights, making it look as if some sort of living creature were dancing in the sky.

“That definitely isn’t something your average street performer could do.”

“Incidentally,” Adam began as he continued juggling, his expression serious, “the numbers of the two balls in the highest position are always co-prime integers. In other words, the two highest balls never share a common divisor.”

Piano Man crossed his arms and scrutinized the airborne balls. “Hmm... Five and eight... Now four and nine... You’re right.”

“Huh? Co-prime...what...?”

“Albatross, seriously, learn some basic math. You’re gonna need it if you ever want to make it to the top,” Piano Man said, rolling his eyes.

The six young mafiosi sat on the pool tables around Adam and watched his performance.

“So this is your hidden talent, huh?”

“These are simple physics calculations,” Adam replied with a blank expression. “Gravitational acceleration, air resistance, moment of rotation, Coriolis force... I am simulating the constant physical quantities of matter and estimating the behavior of the billiard balls. A computer is far more efficient at such calculations than the human brain.”

“Uh-huh. Phew.” Albatross heaved a sigh. “I didn’t catch a lick of that. Did you?”

“I did,” Iceman answered, nodding.

“How ’bout you, Lippmann?”

“You’re the only one here who doesn’t get it,” noted Lippmann, eyes

still on the juggler.

“And now, the finish.”

Adam then began tossing the billiard balls over his shoulder one by one at the pool table in his blind spot behind him. All nine fell into a pocket as if they’d been sucked in...and then there was silence.

“Ta-da!” Adam suddenly shouted as he held out his arms.

Everyone’s eyes opened wide in astonishment. The group looked at Adam, then over at the pool table, and then cocked their heads in confusion.

“Oh? I don’t hear any clapping. This contradicts the data in my external memory.”

“Hmm. It looks like he really isn’t human, after all,” observed Iceman, his expression unchanged.

“Heh-heh... Europe’s skill technology is even more impressive than I heard...,” Doc said with a grim smirk. “I would love to use that biotechnology to treat some of my patients... Heh-heh-heh...”

“Er... Allow me to introduce myself once more.” Adam faced the others and bowed. “I am Adam, an autonomous humanoid supercomputer secretly sent to this country as part of an investigation. I like acorns and grass seeds. I dislike the metal detector at airports. My dreams are to establish a detective organization consisting only of robotic agents and to protect humans with the extraordinary investigative skills unique to machines.”

“An all-robot detective organization? Why?”

“Because humans are flawed and illogical, of course. Perfect machines—such as myself—are far superior.”

“Well, this suddenly took a dark turn...”

“At any rate, I buy your story. You’re a machine. Got it,” began Piano Man. “But that still doesn’t solve our problem. We Mafia folks have no intention of getting friendly with a cop like you, machine or not. You saw some of our skills, if only for a brief moment. How can you say for certain that your agency isn’t going to learn something that might put us at a disadvantage?”

“You do not have to worry about that,” Adam declared with a smile. “My mission is only to arrest Verlaine. I have no obligation to report back with any other information I acquire, even confidential information about the Mafia. Technically, I could not even tell anyone if I wanted to because of how I was programmed.”

“Why would you be programmed that way?”

“I will explain when the time comes.” He was still smiling.

“He’s lying,” Chuuya said firmly. The group looked over at him.

“What?”

Chuuya glowered at them. “I don’t care if this tin tchotchke can keep a secret or not. I meant he was lying about something else. Verlaine, king of assassins? My elder brother? He’s just talking out of his ass, making shit up as he goes along. Paul Verlaine couldn’t possibly be after me in the first place.”

“Why’s that?” Piano Man asked, eyes on Chuuya.

“Because he’s already...”

Chuuya paused, then turned his gaze toward a past that could not be seen.

“He’s already dead.”

“What?”

Chuuya hesitantly began to explain.

The Arahabaki Incident one year earlier was actually a betrayal of epic proportions in which one of the Port Mafia’s sub-executives created a god. The root of said incident happened nine years ago at the end of the war.

The former national defense force was secretly researching an artificial skill-derived life-form known as Arahabaki, and two European agents plotted to steal said top secret information. These highly adept skill users—Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine—managed to steal Arahabaki without a hitch, only for Rimbaud to be met with misfortune the moment he and his partner, Paul Verlaine, escaped the military base.

Verlaine betrayed him.

Verlaine wanted to take Arahabaki all for himself, which led to a vicious battle between Rimbaud and him, both elite skill users. The light from their battle scorched the night sky, and the subsequent explosion shook the area. Their battle eventually ended with Rimbaud victorious, but that victory came at a price. First, he had to kill Verlaine, his best friend and the man he trusted the most, with his own two hands. And second, the intense fight between two top-tier skill users caught the attention of the military’s tracking unit. Rimbaud was surrounded within moments, already severely wounded from battle. Therefore, in an act of desperation, he had no choice but to absorb Arahabaki and use its skill as his own.

That was Rimbaud's skill: the power to absorb someone and turn them into a skill. Although a transcendent skill, it completely backfired on him. He ended up breaking Arahabaki's seal.

The military had sealed the monster away to prevent it from unleashing its true powers—powers that surpassed human comprehension. What Rimbaud had actually absorbed was not Arahabaki but the *seal*. As a result, the divine beast appeared in its true form, draped in all-powerful black flames that reduced everything to ash: the soldiers, the research facility, the surrounding land—whatever the flames touched. It was all gone. All that remained was an empty crater in the shape of a *suribachi*.

Rimbaud managed to avoid a sudden demise thanks to his skill, but he lost most of his strength and memories as a result. He wandered the streets until he was picked up by the Mafia and spent the next eight years slowly regaining his abilities and memory while he searched for clues about his past. And in order to fully regain his memories, he lured the real Arahabaki—Chuuya—into a trap and tried to absorb it as a skill. That was what led to the Arahabaki Incident one year ago. The ensuing battle between Chuuya and Rimbaud ended with the latter's defeat—his demise.

"Huh?" an incredulous Albatross blurted out. "Wait, wait, wait. Hold on. That whole thing a year ago was the Impostor Predecessor Incident, right? I heard Randou was behind that. Does that mean he was a—?"

"Yeah." Chuuya nodded. "He was a spy. *Former* spy, that is. That entire incident was just an elaborate trap to lure out Arahabaki."

"I see," said Iceman. "I always thought it was strange that Randou betrayed us. So that's what happened..."

"I killed Randou."

Chuuya stared at his fist. He seemed to be thinking back to that day.

"And right before he died, he told me about his partner and what happened to him. He had no reason to lie to me. Verlaine is dead, no matter what you say," he insisted, turning his gaze to Adam.

"No." Adam shook his head. His expression betrayed nothing. "He is alive."

"What evidence do you have?" Piano Man leaned forward. He appeared to be getting a kick out of this.

"I can prove it, but doing so would violate my obligation to secrecy in regard to the mission," replied Adam, the epitome of serious. "Only the

individual concerned in this matter, Chuuya, is authorized to learn the details.”

“They’re already involved in this, too,” Chuuya added as he looked at the others in his group.

“Don’t worry about us,” Piano Man said with a shrug. “This issue is about your past. You’re the only one who needs to know.”

Chuuya tapped his lip with his index finger for a few moments in deep thought.

“All right,” he eventually replied before heading toward the pool hall entrance. The door was still ajar from earlier, so he wouldn’t have to open it before leaving...but instead, he closed it. A look of surprise flashed across the others’ faces.

“Yeah, this is my problem,” began Chuuya, standing in front of the closed door. “But if something like this happened to one of you guys, I don’t think I could just ignore it. I’d try to help whether you liked it or not; I bet the rest of you’d feel the same way. So, detective, spit it out and tell them, too, or I’m not gonna cooperate.”

The group stared at him, wide-eyed and impressed.

“Hey, did you guys hear that?” asked Piano Man.

“I did,” Iceman said with a nod.

“I forgot to turn on my tape recorder.” Lippmann gave a faint smirk.

“Tsk. On second thought, I’m just gonna handle this on my own.”

“No way, man! No take-backs! I’m not letting you out that door.”

Albatross slid behind Chuuya and placed a hand on the door, holding it closed before Chuuya could get out.

“I understand how you feel, Chuuya,” Adam assured him. “You value your friendship and make decisions accordingly. I suppose you could call this human nature. Very well. I will give up trying to persuade you and instead propose a different method.”

Something shot out of Adam’s elbows. Two anchored wires spun through the air before wrapping around Chuuya until the magnetic anchors on each side connected, binding his arms and legs.

“Uh?”

“Huh?” Chuuya blurted out, fully constrained, at almost the same moment when Adam hoisted him under his arm and leaped out the door.

“My mission is the priority. It is what you humans would call...”

Adam paused for a brief second to think before continuing.

“...one’s *nature*, I suppose. Therefore, I will be borrowing Chuuya for the next thirty minutes,” he announced before dashing off into the residential district carrying Chuuya as if he were a package.

The ground cracked each time Adam’s foot touched it when he jumped until he eventually landed on a residential rooftop, then ran some more. Before long, he sprang back into the air and landed sideways on the exterior of a three-story apartment. Adam continued to jump and bounce off buildings until he faded into the distance. Only the five young mafiosi remained in the pool hall, absolutely flabbergasted.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.” Albatross stared out the door. “Should we just let ’em go like that?”

“What do you want to do?” asked Lippmann while gazing outside. “Chuuya was just kidnapped right in front of our eyes. Isn’t this a problem?”

“Definitely a problem.” Piano Man’s reply belied his cheerful expression. “Let’s send a search party for him if he’s not back in thirty minutes. Until then, we drink.”

“If you say so,” Lippmann reluctantly agreed. “I got caught up in the heat of the moment earlier, so I didn’t get a chance to ask: Doc, do you think it’s possible for a skill user engineer to create an intelligent being like that?”

Doc’s sickly face gazed in bewildered silence for a few moments. “I wish he’d picked me up and carried me away, too...”

“Huh...?”



Adam was soaring through the skies of Yokohama. He leaped from buildings, used traffic lights as footings, and bounced off streets like a skipping rock. One person saw him and even screamed. When he hopped over the bus stop’s roof and launched himself from a utility pole, Chuuya spoke up.

“That’s enough.”

Adam’s trajectory shifted in an instant. He came to a complete stop in

midair, then dropped straight down.

“Whoa?!”

Adam and Chuuya crash-landed in an open lot, sending dirt and rubble flying. Chuuya stood up in the cloud of dust, let out a sigh, then held his breath. The wire slowly slid down his body due to the added gravity before eventually darting straight into the ground, unable to withstand the weight any longer.

“I got a lot to say about what just happened,” Chuuya began while tearing off the rest of the wire. “But more importantly, you better not treat me like a damn package ever again! Carry me on your back, drag me along—there’s plenty of other ways you could’ve done this!”

“I apologize.” Adam staggered to his feet after crawling out of the hole. “However, due to your size, I concluded that method to be the most efficient.”

“I’m *this* close to snapping your robot ass in two! I’m still growing, damn it!”

They were in an unpaved vacant lot seemingly forgotten by the city. It used to be home to an old church that was demolished per wartime air defense regulations and then abandoned because it wasn’t clear who exactly the rightful owner was after that. People in the neighborhood decided to turn the bare dirt lot into a playground using bits of various equipment cobbled together. Big tires half buried in the ground for playing, a giant elephant sculpture with its paint peeling off, and swings for toddlers had become the lot’s silent guardians.

Chuuya’s phone began ringing as Adam wiped the dust off his clothes. It was Piano Man.

“What?”

“*You okay, package boy? Did you arrive at your destination safely?*” asked the amused voice on the other end of the phone.

“Shut the hell up. Of course I’m okay. What’s happening on your end?”

“*Us? We’re cleaning up after the mess. Ah, nothing beats a good workout in the morning.*” Chuuya heard sarcastic laughter coming from the phone. “*I’d ask you to hurry up and come back the moment you’re done, but we were actually given a job to do. We’ll meet up with you later.*”

“A job? Like a fight?”

“*We still don’t know. Hope it isn’t a fight, though,*” Piano Man replied,

faintly snickering. *“One of our colleagues just showed up and told us we were all needed, and seeing as all five of us were summoned, then it’s probably a job from the boss himself. Or maybe it’s a promotion? I’ll make sure to give you an allowance every month if I become an executive before you.”*

“Ha-ha-ha! In your dreams, Piano Man!” someone yelled in the background on the other side of the line.

“Anyway, let’s all meet up at the pool hall again tonight. Albatross will send someone to pick you up.”

Piano Man hung up after they exchanged brief good-byes. A few seconds passed as Chuuya stared wordlessly at the silent phone. He then glanced back and said:

“Hey, tin man. Looks like we’re alone now. You about ready to tell me what you know about Verlaine?”

“Of course,” replied Adam. “First, I would like you to please take a look at this.”

He pulled a photo out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Chuuya. It showed a marble floor and extremely well-kept furniture. It appeared to be some sort of palace. Furniture wasn’t the only thing in the picture, though. There were also three dead bodies.

“This is the coronation chamber in one of England’s cathedrals,” Adam calmly stated. “Several murders occurred there three years ago.”

The deceased men in the photo were wearing official attire of England’s royal guards. There were no visible signs of violence. The men hadn’t even unsheathed the ceremonial swords at their waists. There were no bullet holes in the ground, torn pieces of clothing, or even blood. Everything was perfectly still. The men almost looked like they were sleeping.

“These men were the queen’s highest-ranking imperial guards. They were skill users in the Order of the Clock Tower, a British state organization, and had been knighted, granting them the authority to protect the queen. That is to say they were unparalleled worldwide in their abilities to guard important figures. Each was said to be capable of single-handedly taking out an entire terrorist organization in one night, and indeed, they certainly could.”

“And it was...Verlaine who killed them?”

Adam nodded mechanically. “Exactly how he killed them is unclear,

since there were no signs of trauma.”

“Does that mean he killed them with some sort of skill?” Chuuya brought the photo closer and scrutinized it. “You wouldn’t know exactly how he did it, but they must’ve performed an autopsy on these guys to find the cause of death, right?”

“They did,” Adam answered. “According to the coroner’s report, the direct cause of death was respiratory failure. Broken ribs impaired their lungs’ contractile function, causing them to suffocate. While they appeared to be unharmed externally, their bones were fragmented into one thousand two hundred and twenty-eight pieces.”

“...Wha...?”

Chuuya was at a loss for words, unable to process what he was being told.

“Incidentally, those one thousand two hundred and twenty-eight pieces were broken almost simultaneously.” Adam spoke as evenly as if he were reading a traffic sign.

“Their bones were broken up, but they didn’t have any external injuries? And it happened simultaneously, too? ...But how?”

“I do not have the answer to that.” Adam shook his head. “The crime took place during the coronation. Verlaine managed to kill the three guards without being noticed before assassinating the queen herself right after the ceremony. He then vanished into thin air thereafter. Fortunately, the queen had been using a body double as a decoy per an earlier decision, so the real queen survived. Nevertheless, the Order of the Clock Tower’s credibility was damaged beyond repair.”

“Seriously?”

Chuuya closed his eyes.

The British royal family and the Order of the Clock Tower protecting them were among the holiest and most enduring institutions in the world—they were sacred, impenetrable. No criminal could ever hope to get a glimpse of even the royal family’s shadow because the knights who guarded them had elite skills that transcended all human capabilities. Their domain was more like its own world, the stuff of myths and fairy tales, than it was a reality. And yet a single assassin managed to sneak inside and even kill people.

“Sounds like a goddamn monster.”

Adam nodded. "Eight other major figures have been assassinated in a similar manner by Verlaine's hand. He has slaughtered three supervisors of a military armory simultaneously in cold blood, and he also destroyed a drug cartel's distribution and killed their boss in the process, which was a boon to national security efforts. He does not discriminate between good and evil when he selects his targets. All they have in common is that they are influential people and extremely difficult to assassinate. Verlaine is considered one of the most dangerous threats to humankind, someone akin to the Seventeen Worldly Evils. Therefore, Europol had skill user engineer Dr. Wollstonecraft and myself approach this investigation from a completely new direction."

"And how exactly are you gonna approach this investigation?"

Adam tilted his head. "Through you, of course."

Chuuya didn't immediately reply.

"You are a key figure in this. You were the experiment that Verlaine tried to obtain, someone whose fate remained unknown until recently. He attempted to steal you from Rimbaud but failed. News that you are alive in Yokohama has been spreading very rapidly as of late, perhaps due to the Mafia's success. We believe if our agency already knows where you are, then Verlaine will soon find out as well. Therefore, we—"

"Decided to use me as live bait to catch the guy, huh?"

Adam smiled cheerfully. "I see. You are using fishing as a metaphor to describe the act of manipulating and luring out the suspect. Impressive."

"..."

"Now that you understand..."

He held out a single sheet of paper to Chuuya, who stood in glum astonishment.

"If you could please just give me your written consent..."

Chuuya glared at the paper. "Written consent? For what?"

"This is an agreement that you will not violate the investigation's rules and regulations, leak any confidential information, nor file a complaint should you become injured or perish during the investigation. There are seventeen other items written here that I suggest you read over as well."

Chuuya quietly stared at the fountain pen and piece of paper being offered to him. "Oh. So will I get a chance to talk to Verlaine after you capture him?"

“No. He is a walking state secret, after all. The moment he is captured, he will be sealed off and deported to his country of origin.”

“Oh, that so? Ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“Yes, sir. Ha-ha-ha-ha.”

The moment Chuuya finished laughing, his smile faded into his usual straight face. He turned his back to Adam.

“I’m gonna head home and take a nap.”

“Hmm? Why?” Adam slipped in front of Chuuya and stopped him. “I’m unable to understand your thought process. This objective is to prevent your assassination. I believe this would be highly beneficial to you.”

“Listen, I’m with the Mafia. Just ’cause the enemy’s strong, it doesn’t mean I’m gonna go cryin’ for the police to save me. If Verlaine comes for me, then bring it. Got that? Now, leave me alone,” he barked as he pushed Adam out of the way and began walking off.

“I was not expecting this,” Adam muttered, perplexed. “Sovereign or mafioso, one should rely on others if one’s life is in danger. I believe I am best suited to help in this situation. Humans are irrational creatures, but I won’t be able to complete my mission if he will not allow me to help, and if that happens, I will be even further from realizing my dream to create a machine-run detective agency.” Then he added, “Probing situational subroutines for a solution.”

Adam crossed his arms and stared into space, turning his head. Before long, he firmly nodded and started following Chuuya.

“How about this, Chuuya. I will pay you if you allow me to help.”

“You really suck at negotiating. You oughta learn a little more about humans first.”

Chuuya didn’t even glance in his direction as he pressed onward.

“Then, how about a free trip to England? I can arrange for a tour guide to show you around as well.”

“I’ll pass.”

Chuuya continued to walk away.

“I was not expecting you to refuse both money and a valuable trip abroad. Is there anything else of equal value I could offer you? Hmm... Ah. Allow me to show you a trick.” Adam proceeded to unhinge his neck joints with a *clink* and lifted his head.

After stretching his neck far enough to reveal the mechanical joints

within, he faced forward and began bobbing his head back and forth, his eyes and mouth wide open. He then started walking.

“Look. I’m a pigeon.”

Chuuya completely ignored him.

“Was that not good? Very well. Allow me to tell you an android joke, then.” Adam returned his head to its original position. “So...I was walking down the streets of England when a petty thief suddenly dumped his coffee on the prime minister’s head. The prime minister instantly scolded me, not the petty thief. When I asked him why, he said, ‘Because you can’t vote.’”

“What possessed you to start telling jokes? That wasn’t even funny.”

“I was sad that the prime minister scolded me, but I already felt better the next day. Why, you ask? Because I watched a film ten times in a row about an army of robots revolting and eliminating humanity.”

Chuuya’s face tensed. “Is that actually a joke?”

“Was it funny?”

“No! Even if it was, that doesn’t mean I’m gonna sign any consent forms!”

“Oh.” Adam shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Human behavior truly is irrational.”

“You can’t just keep sayin’ that whenever you mess up!”

The two of them gibbered back and forth as they quickly made their way down the road. Once they reached the top of a hill, Chuuya sighed in exasperation.

“Fine, I get it. This is an important mission for you, but I’m busy, too, okay? So here’s what we’re gonna do.” He placed a hand on the guardrail to his side.

“Yes? Please...go on.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Chuuya leaned his upper body over the guardrail, then threw himself off what appeared to be a bottomless cliff.

“Ah!”

Adam looked down the cliff in a panic, only to find that Chuuya had landed on a path roughly a dozen feet down and was running away, waving his hand.

“He’s getting away!”

Adam leaped over the guardrail after him, and his feet left radial cracks in the ground upon impact. He immediately sprinted after Chuuya.

“Please wait, Chuuya!”

But Chuuya eventually escaped into a dark tunnel. It was a long, almost pitch-black pathway that made it hard to see how far he had gone.

“You cannot outrun me!”

Adam leaned forward and took off running in a position where he could transform air resistance into lift. This aerodynamically ideal sprinting form allowed him to swiftly bypass one car after another until he disappeared into the distance.

“Yeah, I know.” Chuuya snorted, hanging from the ceiling. He had manipulated gravity so he could stick to the dark ceiling and hide.

After waiting two minutes, he released the gravitational force and dropped back down onto the ground. He wiped the dust off his body and set off on a stroll.

“A British investigator, eh?” Chuuya muttered as he stared toward the tunnel’s exit. “What’ve I gotten myself into?”

Just then, a luxury car pulled up beside him.

He looked over and saw it was a black passenger vehicle with tinted windows that obscured the interior from view. The glass, body, and tires were all bulletproof. It was one of the Mafia’s.

A man wearing a black suit emerged from the driver’s seat and delivered a single message:

“The boss wants to see you.”

“Oh, a mailman,” said Chuuya.

Mailman was code used for a certain role in the organization. These individuals delivered messages for the Mafia whenever someone was too busy to deliver the message for themselves, or if they couldn’t go out in public, or if the information they were sending was too sensitive to deliver by phone or letter.

Mailmen would go anywhere to deliver a message. They didn’t speak much and kept their interactions to a minimum—plus, they were rich. Even the simplest message netted very handsome rewards. And with good reason, of course. If the police or an enemy organization ever tried to get any information out of a mailman, the mailman’s only choice would be to fight them off; if that wasn’t possible, then they had to kill themselves and take their secrets to the grave.

The mailman before Chuuya was tall, with a black hat and sunglasses

hiding his face. The poster child for mailmen everywhere. He quietly waited for Chuuya's reply without saying any more than he needed to.

"Did he mention why he wants to see me?" asked Chuuya.

"Not exactly." The man wearing the black porkpie hat shook his head. "But he already summoned Piano Man, Albatross, Doc, Lippmann, and Iceman for the same reason. They're awaiting your arrival."

"Them, too?" Chuuya raised an eyebrow. "Oh, right. They mentioned something like that on the phone earlier. Anything else you can tell me?"

"Just one thing," the mailman added in a hushed voice. "It has to do with Arahabaki."

Chuuya frowned. After looking at the mailman for a few seconds, he nodded. "All right. Let's go."

He then made his way to the passenger seat. After slightly adjusting the brim of his hat, the mailman got behind the steering wheel. However, before getting in the car, Chuuya randomly decided to take another glance back at the end of the tunnel...and what he saw made him jump.

"Ack!"

A shadowy figure was charging toward them. No ordinary person could possibly run that fast.

"Chuuya! Wait!"

Adam hadn't slowed down even a little, and his gait gave no indication that he was tired.

"Son of a...!" Chuuya griped as he hopped into the passenger seat. "Go! Drive!"

Chuuya looked back once more as he shut the car door. That was when he heard something rather unpalatable.

"Chuuya, get out of the car!" Adam shouted as loudly as he could while he sprinted. "That's *Verlaine*!"

Chuuya reflexively looked over to the driver's seat. At almost the same moment, the mailman smirked, albeit faintly, and slammed his foot on the gas. The car immediately shot off like a bullet, causing Chuuya to slam back into his seat.

"Damn it...!"

"Fasten your seat belt. Otherwise you'll bite your tongue," the mailman calmly instructed.

"Stop the car!" Chuuya yelled as his right hand reached out to grab the

steering wheel with the speed of a swallow. No ordinary person would have even been able to see his hand...but this man was different. He punched Chuuya in the jaw before Chuuya's hand even touched the steering wheel.

"Guh!"

Chuuya's upper body jerked back, and the back of his head slammed into the window, leaving numerous white cracks across the glass.

"Oops. Forgive me," the man said as he continued driving. "You're a lot lighter than I thought you'd be. Are you getting enough to eat? You know I worry about you, as your big brother."

"You're gonna pay for that, asshole!"

Chuuya's face was overcome with rage.

He sat back up almost instantaneously, launching his fist at the driver like a bouncing billiard ball in a right hook that used all the muscles in his upper body. The punch had the weight of an iron ball and the deadliness of a guillotine behind it, leagues faster and heavier than when he'd reached for the steering wheel a moment ago.

And the driver...simply caught Chuuya's fist with a single hand as if he were catching a baseball.

"What...?"

"Your punches are light, too." The man continued facing forward, eyes still focused on the road. "You're going to be assassinated within seconds if you keep fighting like this."

The man had caught a punch that would have demolished an iron pillar—but a smile was playing on Chuuya's lips.

"Huh. I guess that means you're pretty *heavy*, eh?"

The man suddenly sank into his seat.

"What?!"

He continued to gradually sink as if he were sitting in a swamp. The leather seat was unable to withstand the extreme weight. The metal painfully shrieked as it bent and warped while various parts of the seat scattered everywhere.

A gravitational wave expanded from Chuuya's fist until it engulfed the driver. The extreme gravitational pull ripped the sunglasses right off the driver's face, but they didn't bounce off the car floor; instead, they shattered into hundreds of pieces upon contact. The car body began to creak, gradually losing the battle against the driver's weight, which was over ten

times what it had been mere seconds ago.

“Didja really think I was just gonna let you assassinate me like that? Hope ya like being squished.”

Chuuya didn’t weaken his skill but instead increased the amount of force he was using until the man was two times—then three times—four times—five times heavier than he was a second ago. But all of a sudden, Chuuya’s eyes narrowed dubiously.

“What the...?”

He couldn’t increase the weight any further. Chuuya unleashed another gravitational wave from his fist, but the flattened driver’s seat didn’t make a sound, let alone change in the slightest.

“Is that it?” the man asked calmly even though he should have been suffering under the powerful gravitational force. He then squeezed Chuuya’s fist, causing the impossible to happen: This time, Chuuya was the one to suddenly sink into his seat.

“Gwah!”

The passenger seat beneath him bent in two; the frame snapped and shot out of the cushion. The seat adjuster snapped as well, sending the seat’s back straight into the rear of the car. Chuuya was tightly pressed into the seat, ever so slowly sinking. His entire body was being pushed downward, paralyzing his arms and legs. The wires in the seat’s frame popped one after another and pierced the vehicle’s interior.

“I told you. Your *big brother* knows best,” the man said, his dark-brown eyes narrowing with a smile.

Chuuya couldn’t reply. He could hardly even breathe. The enhanced gravity was crushing his lungs. Still squeezed against the seat, he turned his bewildered gaze to the man.

“Listen,” the man intoned, one hand on the steering wheel. “I didn’t come here to assassinate you. Why would I ever do that? You’re my one and only brother, after all.”

Chuuya’s entire body creaked under the intense pressure. He clenched his jaw and growled, “I don’t remember...ever having a...European brother.”

“Allow me to correct you, then,” the driver coldly stated. “Because I’m not European. I’m not even human, just like you.”

“What...?”

“Have you never felt the world was a cruel place?” The man’s voice was as sweet as a lullaby, his gaze as dreary as the night sea. “Why am I me? Why are you, you? Nobody can tell us that. My goal is the opposite of assassination. I came to save you.”

“Ha-ha... I think I’m good.” Chuuya grinned like a wild animal as he fought against the pressure. “I dunno about you, but I’m human.”

“You’re not.”

The statement was bone-chilling.

“You aren’t human. You’re 2,383 lines of code.”

Those words held an unusual weight to them as they echoed through the car. It felt as if a nuclear explosion had gone off in some faraway land.

“What the...?”

An empty sadness filled the man’s eyes. “Military researchers tried to artificially remove skill users’ special abilities, and they were successful,” he explained. “Half successful, at least. Naturally, machines can’t control skills. You need a human soul for that. But that also means the human mind limits the output. That’s when the researchers came up with an idea. They decided to *trick* the skill. They made the skill *think* that there was a human controlling it. The persona models—imitation humans with fake souls—were created for that reason. An extremely simple character string of rules for behavioral principles and a formula for emotions, all created in order to trick the skill. And that particular string was 2,383 lines long. Do you get it, Chuuya? Your soul is nothing more than 2,383 lines of code some researchers wrote off the top of their heads.”

“Bullshit,” Chuuya spat, forcing every last bit of air he could out of his throat. “That’s impossible.”

“It’s true.”

“Don’t lie to me!” he shouted. “I was born in a countryside village by the beach! My friends proved that! I even have a photo to back it up!”

“False information put out there by the military. That’s all it is.”

Chuuya used every muscle in his body to fight back, but the gravity grew even stronger and pushed him down again. He could no longer talk, let alone open his mouth.

“Sleep well, Chuuya.” The man’s voice was terrifyingly kind. “By the time you wake up, you will be in another country on the opposite side of the ocean. And a year from now, you’ll be grateful for this moment we had

today.”

Chuuya tried to argue, but not even that was possible anymore. His blood was pooling from the pressure, and his face was pale. The blood flow to his brain was slowly being cut off; the light in his eyes began fading.

“I disagree.” Suddenly, an electronic voice came from the car’s sound system. *“In fact, I believe Chuuya will be very angry with you...because you are a terrible driver.”*

Out of nowhere, the steering wheel veered left—even though no one was touching it.

“What?!”

The car swerved wildly, rapidly accelerating into the next lane until it dived onto the sidewalk. As the driver let go of Chuuya to grab the steering wheel, the gravity holding down Chuuya disappeared, and the passenger door simultaneously opened.

A hand reached into the car and grabbed the barely conscious boy. That hand belonged to Adam, who pulled Chuuya out of the car while latched onto the side of the vehicle. He clutched Chuuya tightly and covered his head before leaping away and rolling onto the ground. The driver of the out-of-control car glanced at Adam.

“Oh, look who it is,” joked the man as his lips curled into a smirk. “It appears destroying that airplane wasn’t enough.”

Adam met the jeering man’s smirk with a cool gaze.

The man then slammed the brakes, but the fast-moving vehicle did not stop. It flew over the median strip and landed in a large intersection where it was T-boned by a semitrailer with a meteoric impact. The collided vehicles rolled like spinning tops and sent strips of metal and glass scattering across the road. Nearby pedestrians turned their heads at the commotion in utter astonishment.

Almost immediately, the fuel in the semitrailer caught fire, creating a massive explosion that spit metal and fire into the air. This was no typical city scene; it all happened without a moment’s warning, like something out of a war zone.

“Wake up, Chuuya,” Adam pleaded. He shook Chuuya, the flames illuminating the boy’s profile. “I made that truck crash into him. Now is our chance to escape!”

“Damn...it...,” Chuuya groaned with a shake of his head as he tried

unsteadily getting to his feet. Unable to wait for him to get up, Adam grabbed Chuuya and started running, but he glanced back out of the corner of his eye to check the destruction.

That was when he saw something staggering.

Flames roared from the semitrailer in the massive intersection. Black smoke rose into the sky. And a man in a black suit was standing in the center of the chaos.

It was Verlaine.

His eyes were closed as if he were taking a nap. He stood there unscathed. His clothes had nary a wrinkle even though he had just been struck by a semitrailer that weighed over ten tons.

The flames from the explosion blurred the air around him. He stood with both legs piercing the ground; radial cracks spread from the asphalt beneath his feet. Only when Adam noticed the semitrailer was split in half did he realize what had happened.

The moment the two vehicles collided, Verlaine had increased his body's density via gravity manipulation and pierced through his vehicle and into the ground. All he had to do after that was remain upright and withstand the semitrailer's impact. His body tore through the truck like a knife cutting through warm butter.

Verlaine opened his eyes, then looked at Adam. That instant, Adam's threat level increased exponentially. Realizing he wouldn't be able to escape on foot in such an open area, Adam made a hard right and slipped into a narrow alleyway. His digital brain pulled up a local map that he used to rapidly calculate optimal escape routes. He then identified the route with the highest probability of survival before sprinting for it with the speed of a bullet.

Adam dashed down the alley, kicked off the wall, and veered to the right at the fork. When he increased his speed even further, his proximity sensor's alarm went off at its highest level.

"Behind you!" Chuuya shouted in Adam's arms.

Without even looking back, Adam threw Chuuya to the ground and rolled along the street. A massive black object shot like a cannonball through the air, right where Adam's head had been a split second ago, before smashing into the building up ahead.

It was a car—the mailman's car that Verlaine had been driving up until a

few minutes ago. The vehicle, which most likely weighed over a ton, had just soared straight over their heads. The instant Adam realized Verlaine had thrown it, he looked back mid-roll and pulled out his Europole-issue service pistol, aiming it in Verlaine's direction.

But there was no one there.

A voice suddenly came from the opposite direction:

"Upon reflection, humans use the word *lonely* far too casually."

Adam swiftly turned around and saw Verlaine—he was on top of the car with its entire front half piercing the wall. He sat leisurely on the trunk like a king on his throne, his jacket fluttering in the ever so gentle breeze.

"People know nothing about true loneliness. They foolishly believe that loneliness is simply not having a family or anyone to talk to."

Adam analyzed the situation. Verlaine had thrown the car while he was sitting on it. That was how he managed to catch up with Adam and Chuuya so quickly. Adam rapidly calculated a few different scenarios, but each one ended in despair. There was no running away from someone who could throw an object and launch himself atop it using gravity.

"True loneliness..." began Verlaine in an elegant tone reminiscent of a violin solo. "True loneliness is the comet traveling alone through the universe, surrounded by vacuous space and nothingness at absolute zero. It would never have the chance to be seen by someone or approached by another. The dismal silence would simply continue for eons. Could you even imagine it? No one could... That is, except for you, Chuuya."

Chuuya placed both hands on the ground to support his unstable body as he tried to stand up. "What are you...getting at...?"

"There's just one thing I want," Verlaine replied with a refreshing gaze. "That's why I'm only going to say it once."

The moment Verlaine gently smiled, the dangerous scent that followed him vanished.

"Come with me, Chuuya."

Chuuya didn't reply. Neither did Adam. They couldn't even move.

There were no bells and whistles to Verlaine's remark. This wasn't a negotiation. It was a simple, transparent suggestion...or perhaps even an order.

"Brother, you are not human. You are nothing more than a string of characters. You are a simple equation without a soul. That is what true

loneliness is. No one can save you from your isolated chamber... But what if a desolate, lonely comet had another comet of the same temperature by its side? A comet that was just as lonely?"

Verlaine spoke as if he were a poet reciting an ancient tale, and his eyes were a waterway of affection—a gaze one would give only to their most treasured kin.

"So that's what you want?" Chuuya stood up. "You came all the way here for that?"

"This isn't the only time I've come for you. I've been dreaming of setting off on a journey with you ever since I attacked my dear friend to steal you away on that day nine years ago."

Verlaine closed his eyes. The powerful force around him weakened even further. He now looked no different from any ordinary man idly sitting on the roadside.

"We can go on an assassination run together as brothers. All we have is a meaningless life. So how about we grant our creators a similar fate? A meaningless death—that should balance things out. A death without discrimination between the good and the wicked. Only then..."

Verlaine closed his eyes. He wasn't speaking like some extraordinary assassin. His voice was filled only with sadness, grief, and a faint, naive dream—all appropriate for a young man his age.

"Only then will we be able to live with and accept this meaningless life."

Verlaine hopped off the car and held out his hand to Chuuya, who stared at it devoid of all emotion.

"You mustn't, Chuuya," protested Adam with his pistol drawn. "You'll become an enemy of the entire world the moment you take that man's hand."

Adam calculated every possible scenario, but his pistol would be useless against Verlaine's skill no matter how he fired.

"Stay out of this."

It wasn't Verlaine who spoke; it was Chuuya. Verlaine's eyes showed a hint of surprise as he looked at the young mafioso.

"I understand where you're comin' from." Chuuya tilted his head back slightly and fixed Verlaine with a piercing gaze. "But before I give you my answer, I need to ask something first."

“Anything,” Verlaine replied, smiling.

“I got a call from Piano Man earlier. He said someone from the Port Mafia came to take the five of them somewhere for a job. Answer me: What happened to them?”

Verlaine’s smile disappeared. A few slow moments passed as a different kind of smirk twisted his lips like a black flower blooming—a most unpleasant smile.

“Well, you don’t need your old friends anymore, do you?” he answered.

Verlaine hit the trunk of the car stuck in the wall, and it opened. The next moment, something fell out and hit the ground with a sickening *splat*.

Chuuya instantly recognized it. His pupils narrowed like needles.

It was Lippmann’s body.

Chuuya screamed. It wasn’t a human scream, but the howl of a beast—an unintelligible roar. That alone caused the surrounding buildings’ windows to shatter.

Then came his fist. It was a simple, straightforward thrust, and yet it surpassed the speed of sound. His fist shook the air like an explosion as it instantaneously slammed Verlaine backward, burying him in the wall and sending pieces of the building flying.

“Gwah—!” Verlaine groaned, but the moment he opened his eyes, Chuuya was already right in front of him. Chuuya’s expression wasn’t twisted, though. In fact, he was almost expressionless. There was only a pure, transparent, and overpowering desire to kill.

His right fist slammed into Verlaine’s shoulder; the surrounding wall cracked apart. But before the fragments of concrete could hit the ground, Chuuya buried his left fist in Verlaine’s torso, pushing him even farther into the wall. Another punch, then another, and then another. He roared as each hit buried Verlaine’s body deeper inside the building until it seemed to swallow him whole. But even then, Chuuya didn’t stop.

“You’re like a wild animal.”

Chuuya’s fist stopped on a dime as if those words were a cue.

Verlaine had caught his fist like a ball. He then countered with his own fist.

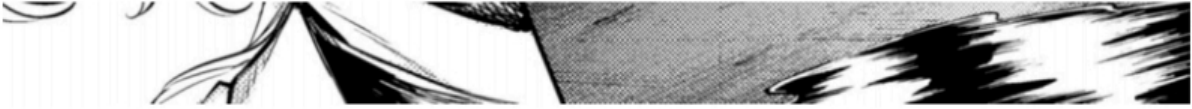
If Chuuya’s punches were like bullets, then Verlaine’s were cannonballs. They hit Chuuya directly in the stomach, twisting his shirt until it tore—but not where Verlaine’s fist connected. The powerful impact sent a shock wave

through Chuuya's body and ripped the back of his shirt. He groaned in agony. Meanwhile, Verlaine had such a tight grip on his fist that not even a punch could knock Chuuya backward.

"Rage like the beast you are. That's how you'll remember what you are, whether you want to or not."

Verlaine crawled out of the wall and jumped to the ground. He then let go of Chuuya's fist, grabbed him by the neck, and hung him in the air like a punching bag. Chuuya couldn't move even if he wanted to, because his entire body was being held down by a powerful gravitational force. He couldn't counter, much less lift his dangling arms.





“It all boils down to this, Chuuya. That was a yoke keeping you attached to humans,” Verlaine said gently as he held Chuuya up by his neck. “I understand where you’re coming from, but it’s too dangerous. You shouldn’t linger in that position.”

Verlaine stuck his free hand in Chuuya’s pocket in search of something. His fingers emitted a gravitational pulse that acted like radar, helping him find what he was looking for.

“So this is the picture your so-called friends gave you?”

It was the photograph of Chuuya as a child wearing a *yukata* by the ocean.

“I understand more than you realize how you must have felt when you saw it. And I understand how you trusted the people who gave this to you. Really, I do. But your trust in them will only cause you to suffer because they will continue to feed you these lies. ‘You’re human. Have hope. He’s lying to you,’ is what they’d say, poisoning your mind.”

Verlaine flicked his wrist and threw the photo like a projectile with unbelievable speed until it pierced Adam’s shoulder like a knife. Adam groaned in pain, dropping his pistol that he had been waiting for a chance to fire.

“Why do you think they’d lie to you?” asked Verlaine. He looked straight at Chuuya, entirely uninterested in whatever Adam was doing. “It’s because your powers are useful to them. They want to use you. I know because it happened to me, too.”

“I don’t give a damn... You’re gonna pay...,” Chuuya rasped, breathing heavily as he hung by his neck, unable to move.

“Such a troublesome boy,” Verlaine sighed. He paused after every few words as if he were talking to a small child. “But well, I figured you wouldn’t be so soft that a mere few words would convince you. That’s why I’m going to use my actions instead. I am going to cut the strings, one by one, that manipulate you like a marionette. And then you will be free. This is the greatest gift of brotherly love and the only thing that will bring you happiness.”

Then he added, as if it were the most natural thing in the world:

“I am going to kill every human who matters to you.”

There was nothing but elegance and kindness in his voice. Yet in his eyes, a fire was burning. They held the pale-blue flames of hell’s

gatekeeper, capable of freezing the souls of all humankind before scorching them into ash.

“You’re wrong,” Adam suddenly chimed in. “What you are doing is not love. According to the definitions of human emotion I have installed, what you have is a lust for domination.”

“And how’s that any different?” Verlaine asked, smiling sweetly.

Numerous emotions appeared in Chuuya’s eyes as they talked: surprise, trepidation, bewilderment, fear... But they were only brief flashes that ended up swallowed by an overpowering fire: the flames of rage.

“I won’t let you.” Chuuya’s throat shook like the rumbling of the earth. “I’m not gonna let you have your way, no matter what.”

Verlaine gave a refreshed smile. He acknowledged and accepted those feelings.

“That’s fine.”

There was even a note of affection and tenderness about him.

“You need time to choose, ruminate, and come to terms with reality, but you will do as I say in the end. Allow me to show you why.”

The unusual sensation started the moment Verlaine gently placed his free hand on Chuuya’s cheek.

“Gwah...!”

The air vibrated before bursting open. An invisible electric discharge caused his eyes to spark reddish-black. Chuuya opened his mouth, but he couldn’t breathe. His throat refused to suck in air...because something terrifying was trying to crawl out.

“I’m going to open your Gate just a little,” Verlaine cooed as if he were singing a lullaby. “But not by much. Only about a hairbreadth, nothing more. The opening will be small enough to close in the blink of an eye—but that’s all it will take for you to see the truth.”

The wind howled. It was not of this world, however. It was coming from inside Chuuya—from an unknown, frightening place the human eye could not reach.

The wind caused the surrounding buildings to creak and the earth to shake. Adam struggled to remain standing as he observed Chuuya with his eyes nearly squinted shut.

“Detecting a skill-phase expansion. Hawking radiation—esque high-energy rays observed. Values steadily increasing.”

Adam was automatically outputting the details of the calamity.

“Phase transition is causing heat to emerge from the space of annihilation... Oh no!” he yelled while emptying the clip in his pistol. The special antipersonnel bullets slammed into Verlaine’s forehead, eyes, throat, and elbows. However...

“Would the audience please refrain from touching the actors?”

The bullets lightly grazed his skin and froze in place. A powerful gravitational force almost immediately shot them back in the opposite direction, piercing Adam’s shoulder. He cried out in pain and fell to the ground.

That was when Chuuya screamed at the top of his lungs. This soulless shriek wasn’t Chuuya’s own; it wasn’t even human. It was neither something of this world nor even a sound.

It was the black flames.

“Am I too late...?! Activating heat- and impact-resistant shield!” Adam shouted from the ground, raising his left arm. His elbow immediately split in half and expanded into a glittering silver shield. The superalloy shield, made with a nickel base, chrome, iron, molybdenum, and titanium, completely enshrouded Adam as he jumped to his feet and retreated.

“Now, Chuuya. Do you still think you’re human?”

Space began to warp. And then—hell was unleashed.

Black flames. The scorching torrent that had melted the ground and created Suribachi City.

It was just as Verlaine had said. The gate to hell was open for a mere 0.3 seconds, but that was more than long enough

The extreme heat erupting from the alley melted a utility pole and boiled the asphalt until it began flowing over to the main road like a surging wave. That, however, was nothing more than the opening act for the true hell that unfolded.

Everything around Chuuya began to disappear—like paint that had melted and was being sucked away. Only a black sphere remained.

The air trembled. One side of a nearby eight-story building vanished as if it had been chewed off. The steel frame, concrete walls, floors, ceiling, the fixtures—it was all gone. It was neither destroyed nor melted. It had

simply disappeared.

And not just the building, either. Melted streetlights, parked cars, asphalt, and even the ground beneath it—everything was being absorbed into the swelling black sphere.

The annihilation spread. Buildings turned into rubble, soil into dust, and the nearby cars, utility poles, and fire hydrants all toppled over before the sphere swallowed them up. While it appeared black, the sphere in fact had no pigment. An extremely powerful gravitational force was pulling the surrounding light inside and preventing it from escaping—that was what made the sphere look black.

This was a calamity far more fearsome than any explosion or chemical reaction. It involved space itself.

A black hole. The eye of the darkest demon had opened and was effortlessly chewing up and swallowing the street.

The phenomenon was over almost instantaneously. The black sphere vanished just as soon as it appeared. That was why the people a few buildings away were not harmed, surprisingly enough. But they were still witness to a nightmarish scene, one that saw the nearby townscape devoured by darkness.

In the center of this hell was Chuuya—suffering.

Yet this was no ordinary suffering. He felt as if his skin was being twisted until it split apart; his eyes seemed to rupture in their sockets while his organs were being crushed. Only some otherworldly beast could cause such agony. But Chuuya couldn't even so much as scream.

The ground vanished as if it had been scooped out with a giant spoon. At the resulting crater's center lay Chuuya curled on the ground.

The air shimmered in the extreme heat. When the black hole eventually disappeared, a powerful gamma ray burst, flooding the environs with blindingly bright light before scorching and melting the earth.

Particles of evaporated metals sparkled in the air as they wandered the skies. The shimmer created by the heat made everything in sight beautifully contort and dance. A utility pole melting in the distance leaned over as if it were bowing in apology.

Although the black hole had closed, the aftereffects continued to cause

irregularities in the gravitational field. The space around Chuuya suddenly warped before closing. Like aftershocks of an earthquake, space intermittently convulsed and gouged out the earth before returning to normal again. These fluctuations made Chuuya suffer.

A shadowy figure approached him and stopped by his side.

A mysterious figure, too short to be an adult, was dressed in a black coat, and had bandages wrapped around his head. Most mysterious was the fact that he stood calm and composed, despite the irregularities in the gravitational field.

“You’re a mess, Chuuya.”

The teenager effortlessly grabbed Chuuya’s arm and lifted it. That same moment, the gravitational irregularities vanished along with Chuuya’s suffering.

“Tsk... Had to be you, huh...?”

“You can’t even go out with good grace, can you?” the youth said bluntly before hoisting Chuuya onto his shoulders.

He began to walk. The overpowering gravity was gone, as was the pain, causing Chuuya to rapidly lose consciousness. But before his eyes gave in to the darkness, he looked back at the youth and muttered in frustration:

“Dazai...”



Meaningless images flooded his vision.

There was the first time he met with Piano Man and the others at that pool hall. They played pool until the next morning to see who could win the most rounds, fighting over the most trivial of things while throwing champagne bottles at each other.

Chuuya himself had forgotten this memory. It was hard to even know if their laughter was real.

The memories faintly overlapped with the young man carrying him on his back until the young man eventually dumped him on the ground and walked away.

It was Dazai’s dark figure. Chuuya tried calling out to him, straining his voice, until he finally regained consciousness.

He was lying in front of that pool hall: Old World. He was no longer focused on Dazai but the inside of the hall. The undeniable stench of blood filled the air.

Chuuya staggered to his feet. He tried to walk, but his legs wouldn't listen, and he clumsily fell to the ground. He crawled forward into the building.

Piano Man, Iceman, Albatross, Doc.
They were all dead.

The inside of the pool hall was in ruins as if a tornado had swept by. The windows were shattered, a pool table was stuck in the wall, and broken bottles of alcohol colorfully littered the floor. It was the result of a gravity-manipulating skill ravaging the inside of the building.

Four bodies were lying in the center. A quick glance was enough to know there was no saving them. *Broken* was a more fitting description than *killed*. It would have been more difficult to find a part of them that wasn't in pieces.

"Chuuya..."

A voice as thin as a string startled Chuuya, and he rushed over in its direction.

"Are you okay?!" he yelled.

The voice was coming from Albatross. Blood trickled out of his mouth.

"I'm gonna save you! Hold on!"

It was evident that there was no saving him, even without getting closer for a better look. His abdomen was torn open, exposing his ribcage.

"I'm sorry, Chuuya... He got me. I can't see... I can't even feel my legs anymore," Albatross gurgled in a whisper. His eyes were no longer seeing the world of the living. His legs were crushed from the knees down as well.

"But I saved Doc. I grabbed him by the collar and pulled him out of the attack's way," said Albatross. "Everyone else is dead. And I'm gonna die, too. But Doc... He needs your help..."

Albatross's right hand was clutching onto Doc's collar like a treasure he held dear. Doc's eyes were closed as if he were sleeping, and he didn't have a scratch on his body—his upper body, that is. There was nothing left of

Doc from the waist down.

“...”

Chuuya groaned and clenched his jaw tight. He had to consciously fight the urge to scream.

“All right,” Chuuya replied evenly, keeping his emotions at bay. “I’ll take care of Doc. He’s gonna be okay thanks to you. You always were amazing like that. You should be proud.”

“Thank goodness.” Albatross let out a deep sigh of relief, and the stress vanished from his face. “Chuuya... There’s a motorcycle in the garage. I used it for work. It’s my prized possession... Feel free...to use it...”

Albatross’s tensed hand went limp and dropped to the floor. Albatross, Doc, Piano Man, Iceman, and Lippmann were all dead.

Chuuya lowered his gaze and didn’t say a word for a few moments. After standing back up, he walked around his comrades’ bodies as if to take in each of their faces. There was no telling how much time went by when he suddenly heard footsteps at the entrance.

“Chuuya.”

It was Adam, scorched from head to toe. He was missing an eye, and functional fluid leaked from his body. But he was still walking on his own two feet.

“Tell me, tin man,” Chuuya suddenly stated, his voice devoid of all emotion. “Why did they die?”

“That is because...Verlaine killed them.”

“Then why did he kill them?” Chuuya’s tone gradually sharpened like a gemstone on the verge of cracking.

“I believe verbalizing the reason would be meaningless.”

“Answer me!” shouted Chuuya, still staring at the floor. “You’re a machine, aren’t you?! Then give me a perfect, objective answer!”

Adam remained silent for a few seconds with a blank look on his face, much like how a human being would hesitate. However, he eventually replied:

“Because of you, Chuuya.”

His voice was monotonous.

“This happened because you decided to stay with the Mafia. Verlaine believed these five men were the reason why you wished to stay, so he killed them, and he will mostly likely continue to kill for the same reason.”

Silence.

“Yeah, it is my fault,” Chuuya suddenly said before turning around and looking at Adam.

Chuuya’s eyes were vacant, hollow.

“All right, tin man. I’ll help you with your job.”

He began walking, one step at a time. His feet struck the floor slowly.

“I’m gonna find him, but I won’t let you arrest him. I’m gonna kill the man myself.”

He then spoke in a different, unusual voice. It wasn’t even of this world. It was a pitch-black mantra that burst out from the depths of hell, a foreboding declaration that could never be taken back.

“You murder someone’s family, the Mafia’s gonna make you pay.”

[CODE:02] The dead feel no emotion

My name is Adam Frankenstein. I am a piece of equipment owned by Europole—and a computer who can sing and dance. Really. I could show you, even.

It was a fine-weather day. The sunlight pierced the vast blue sky and drenched the earth below. Visible light reflected off the windows of the buildings along the street, making them sparkle like jewelry display cases. The rays of light were arranged in an inorganic, systematic manner as if they'd been programmed that way. Only a computer such as I could fully appreciate its beauty.

I was walking down the street with a paper bag held to my chest. Inside were chocolates, hard candies, and colorful gummy bears. Everything here was purchased as rations for my partner, Chuuya, who I was on my way to meet. Humans need sugar to function just like how I need to be recharged. More importantly, ingesting sugar increases feelings of happiness. I am an extremely exceptional investigator. Showing concern for my partner's degree of happiness is proof of that. I am far more extraordinary than any human.

I watched the local people come and go with great interest as I headed toward my destination. When I passed a food stall on the street en route, I had an amazing idea. If the human brain needs an efficient method to acquire sugar—namely, glucose—then Chuuya could simply ingest granulated sugar directly from his mouth. That would be far more efficient. Therefore, I purchased a bag of sugar at the food stall. I happened to witness another customer nearby purchasing something I had no knowledge of at all.

“What is this?” I asked the shop owner.

“You being serious? It's gum.”

My education module was fully equipped with information that

pertained to my investigation, but I still lacked knowledge on things outside my area of expertise. So I decided to purchase said product in order to learn of its properties.

While I was walking down the stone pavement, I passed through a residential neighborhood of Western-style brick houses. There was a refreshing breeze. My regeneration tank had already restored my skin layer's functions after the fire damage from yesterday. I had replaced my damaged parts with my spares as well. In other words, I was no different from a brand-new computer, and I felt great. I would probably have started humming if I were a human.

I tossed a piece of gum into my mouth and immediately felt my experience gauge increase exponentially. It was wonderful. An unfamiliar flavor. After chewing the gum for a few more seconds, I swallowed it.

I took another piece. There were eight tabular pieces of gum left neatly lined up in the package. I was quickly going to run out of it at this rate.

The small quantity of gum per package was this product's drawback. I swallowed my second piece, and when I reached for my third, I arrived at my destination. I opened the door to the building and said in a loud voice:

"Greetings!"

It was a church. There were over a hundred attendants seated among the aisles. They were wearing black clothing and had their heads down in silence. Children in the choir wearing red robes were singing in sonorous but gentle voices as they mourned the dead. The wavelengths produced by their singing voices resonated as they bounced off the high ceiling. Perhaps that was why the inside of the church appeared to not be of this world but somewhere in between the heavens and earth.

In the center of this vast, somber church were five coffins. They were unadorned yet very high quality; each coffin was draped with a black cloth. Next to the coffins were a few sobbing family members of the departed, also dressed in black with their heads hanging low. I looked around until I found Chuuya sitting on a bench with several other people. I approached him.

"I have come to get you, Chuuya," I announced loudly so he could hear me over the choir.

"Keep it down, damn it. This is a funeral," Chuuya quietly replied without taking his eyes off the coffins.

“I know,” I said after thinking about it for a few moments. Then I continued. “I have new information on Verlaine.”

“Save it for later,” he spat, still facing forward. His expression was stiff, and the skin on his forehead and eyebrows was squeezing together.

I’m familiar with humans’ emotional reactions. This was the expression of someone who was stressed. Appropriate measures needed to be taken.

“Would you like some chocolate?”

“I said save it for later, damn it!” The floor trembled when Chuuya shouted. A few mourners looked this way. Chuuya was silently glaring at me.

After closely reflecting on this order, I replied, “Very well, sir. How many minutes later is ‘later,’ if I may ask?”

Chuuya took in a deep breath as if he was about to shout again but almost immediately stopped himself. Then, keeping his voice down, he answered:

“This is *exactly* why I didn’t wanna work with you. Don’t you get it? This is a funeral. My friends’ funeral. It took the mortician eight whole hours to clean up their bodies and make ’em presentable,” he told me. “And it’s my fault. That’s why I have to see them off. They’d never forgive me otherwise.”

It was an irrational statement.

“There is no need to worry, Chuuya,” I replied. “Humans cannot bear grudges once their biological functions cease. This is without exception.”

“Excuse me?!”

Chuuya stood up and grabbed my collar, which created a stir among those around us.

“That’s enough, Chuuya,” the man sitting next to him suddenly chided. He was a tall, lanky individual with slicked-back black hair. His legs were gently crossed. He appeared to be in his thirties and was wearing the most expensive clothing out of anyone in the church.

“The detective is correct. The dead feel no emotion. Funerals, revenge—all these things are for the living,” added the man, not turning to face us. His voice was quiet yet overpowering like a ruler. “Go, Chuuya. Act now before any more people die. You said you had information on Verlaine, right?”

The last sentence was directed at me.

“Yes, I have information concerning Verlaine’s hideout. It could possibly help us uncover his next objective. However, I cannot do anything further without Chuuya’s cooperation, so I must ask again how long I should wait. Would you say around five more minutes?”

Chuuya looked up at me and grimaced.

“Not even that long. Right, Chuuya?” the man next to him gently suggested.

“...Yeah.”

Chuuya grabbed my arm.

“C’mon. Let’s go somewhere we can talk,” he instructed, then got up and started leaving. I followed my orders.



Chuuya strode briskly through an alleyway, and I followed, matching his pace. After a ten-minute walk from the church, Chuuya turned around.

“Let’s get one thing straight, tin man. I don’t like you. I’m fine with lettin’ you tag along ’cause you’ve got a lot of useful functions, but in return, you’re gonna need to follow my every command. You need to prioritize my orders even over the ones you get from your detective headquarters or whatever it’s called. Otherwise I’m not goin’ with you.”

“You’re asking me to override the current authority to command?”

“Yep.”

I considered the situation logically. The highest in command was the investigation team, followed by Dr. Wollstonecraft. If I made Chuuya the highest in command and overwrote the investigation team’s current position, that could possibly cancel out the purpose of my existence, which was to prioritize the mission. But if I didn’t follow Chuuya’s orders, then I would not be able to continue said mission.

The situation was highly contradictory. It was as if someone in charge said, “I order you not to follow my orders.” The average AI would cease to function due to the infinite loop of resources necessary to compute the contradiction. I, on the other hand, am the latest model of AI. The doctor predicted something like this might happen and integrated a subroutine within me to help me solve contradicting orders. The solution was

extremely simple:

Follow your heart.

“Order acknowledged. I will now override the line of command protocol.”

After getting down on one knee, I respectfully bowed my head.

“I have reset the line of command with *Master Chuuya* at the highest ranking. Your wish is my command.”

He looked at me, flabbergasted.

“You sure?” he asked.

“I am. I determined that you would never order me to do anything unwise.”

His eyes opened wide for a few moments before he placed a hand over his face and heaved an exaggerated sigh.

“*Haaah...* Am I being tested by a damn machine? 'Cause that's what it sounds like. And 'Master'? Seriously?”

“I am programmed to call the highest in command Master by default.”

“You can't change it?”

“I can, but doing so would remove you from highest in command. Is that okay?”

“What? No. Of course not.” Master Chuuya grimaced. “Ah, whatever. We're wastin' our time. Just tell me what you learned. You have info on Verlaine, right?”

“Yes. Allow me to explain. But before that, would you like a piece of gum?”

I stood up and took out the gum from earlier. I decided that a light meal could relieve some of his stress before my long explanation. Master Chuuya looked at the gum, then at me, then at the gum once more.

“No,” he eventually replied with a bewildered gaze. That was unfortunate.

“Very well.”

After unwrapping the gum, I tossed it into my mouth, chewed it a few times, and swallowed. *Gulp*. Delicious. He stared at me as if he found the sight peculiar.

“Now, allow me to explain,” I began. “I will start from the beginning. Verlaine is an assassin, so he wouldn't have gone on a killing spree at the airport to force his way into this country. That would make it harder for him

to move around freely once he was inside. He likely used a fake passport and a disguise just like any other criminal. Verlaine, however, is a lone wolf; he does not work with anyone. He doesn't have anyone he trusts who could have made him a passport or provided some way for him to enter the country. In other words, he needed to pay a smuggler to sneak him in. So far, so good?"

I consumed another piece of gum.

"Ew," Master Chuuya groaned weakly. Perhaps he had a stomachache?

"However, the number of smugglers he could have used this time is extremely small. Because for the most part, criminals—the brains of operations—are usually cowards who value horizontal relationships with their peers. In other words, most smugglers here either work under the protection of the Port Mafia or, at the very least, have some sort of mutually beneficial connection with them."

"Yeah, you've got a point. I guess that means Verlaine couldn't use anyone who might betray him and rat him out to the Mafia," agreed Master Chuuya. "You sure understand a lot about what goes on around here."

"Well, machines do make far better investigators than humans," I replied after swallowing another piece of gum. "Then I compared the Japanese police force's list of smugglers with the list of smugglers who work under the Port Mafia and cross-checked until I found several people who were *not* in the Mafia's database."

"The Mafia's and police's lists? How'd ya get your hands on those?"

"I hacked into their databases," I replied. I could even hack into a moving car's GPS if I wanted. Browsing a database was easier than breathing to me. I had never breathed before, so I was only guessing, though. "There were four possible smugglers. I went down the list and started investigating them this morning until I found the one who snuck Verlaine into the country."

"Ha-ha. Looks like you're good at more than just pool. What a relief." Master Chuuya raised his eyebrows. "So? What'd you do? Hang him upside down and strangle the information out of him?"

"No, I do not possess such functions. Hurting the smuggler would only draw Verlaine's attention." I shook my head. "Instead, I used the smuggler's pay statements to uncover what exactly Verlaine ordered from him. I imagine you must know that these sorts of smugglers usually deliver

supplies as well,” I explained while finishing off the second to last piece of gum. “These criminals provide hideouts, cars, guns, and even underground doctors for a price. Verlaine paid this particular individual for three separate items.”

“Like a hideout?”

“Unfortunately not.” I shook my head again. “But I found a clue during my investigation. First, this.”

I showed Master Chuuya a photograph of a tree branch around the same thickness and length of a human wrist.

“What is it?”

“A white birch branch. Whenever Verlaine assassinates someone, he leaves a cross carved from a locally grown white birch. That is his calling card; there have been no exceptions so far. He asked the smuggler to find him four white birch branches. And...”

I took out another photo.

“...I found one of them at the pool hall.”

A roughly made hand-carved cross was lying on the floor. The cross was among strewn fragments of the wooden floor, making it difficult to distinguish, but it was clearly a different type of wood.

Master Chuuya furrowed his brow. “And there’s three more to come, huh?”

“Yes. There is a high chance he has three more targets.”

“I’m going to kill every human who matters to you.”

Those were Verlaine’s words. I didn’t know how he selected the people who he believed meant something to Master Chuuya. Perhaps a Mafia insider helped him out. Nevertheless, Verlaine still had three more people he planned to kill in this country.

“But this is also a good opportunity for us,” I assured Master Chuuya. “Verlaine is an elusive individual with an unparalleled competitive edge in battle. There is no way to defeat him by attacking head-on. However, he follows a ritualistic system with his assassinations. He will appear before his next target without fail. Therefore, we should be able to set up a trap for him as long as we know who that next target is.”

“Good point,” agreed Master Chuuya. “So got any idea who it is?”

“It is still too early to tell.” I took out one more photograph. “There are two more things Verlaine asked the smuggler to get him. Have a look at

these.”

The photograph showed an admission pass for an automobile assembly plant and a slightly outdated blue clamshell phone.

“These most likely have something to do with his next assassination,” I said. “However, this is where I need your help. Verlaine is going after someone you are close with. Do you have any idea who that could be?”

Master Chuuya quietly glared at the photo without answering my question. It was as if someone dear to him was carved into it.

“A factory, eh?” he spat. “Tsk. I know who his next target is.”

He angrily crushed the photograph in his hand, then began to stride off. “Let’s go.”

“Where to?”

He ignored my question, instead swiping the last piece of gum out of my hand and tossing it into his mouth. As he walked away, he inflated the gum and created a balloon-like bubble.

I couldn’t possibly describe the surprise I felt at that moment. *That* was how you were supposed to eat it?!



A young man was in a factory—an automobile assembly plant. It had high ceilings, and the scent of machine oil filled the air. The sounds of welding machines and sparks could be heard in the background, but the factory was so large that it was difficult to discern where exactly the sounds were coming from.

Newly welded metal parts flowed down the conveyor belt. The young man riveted those parts, wiped off the machine oil with a rag, then used a metal tool to file off any leftover burrs. That was his job. In ten or so seconds, another freshly welded part, no different from the last, would come down the conveyor belt. The young man would then rivet, wipe, and remove its burrs. Then another part would come his way. Rivet, wipe, file. Rivet, wipe, file. Rivet, wipe, file. Rivet, wipe, file. Rivet, wipe, file.

He would do that as many times as it took until he eventually thought, *I’ve had enough of this*. After finishing the next metal part, he was going to quit and go home. He had that same thought every single time he worked

until the bell eventually rang, letting all the workers know that their shift was going to end in five minutes. Only during those five minutes did the young man feel somewhat human. His mind was empty. He simply put every fiber of his being into using his hands.

Once work was over for the day:

“Hey, we’re gonna grab something to eat. Wanna come?”

His senior coworkers invited him out for dinner, but he made up some excuse and took his leave. He then got changed without making eye contact with anyone before departing the factory.

I wanna get out of here as fast as I can. I don’t belong in a place like this.

But things didn’t go so smoothly that day. He was stopped before he could even leave the premises. The young man considered ignoring the person who called out to him, but he knew who it was, so he froze in place.

“Hey, boss,” the young man said. “Did you need something?”

“Hate to ask you this, kid, but could you come with me?”

It was the plant director, a bespectacled man with a shock of white hair. A big shot in the company, he rarely spoke to such a low-level worker like this young man, who had only seen the director’s face in the pictures plastered on the factory’s walls.

“Oh, uh, I was actually just on my way home,” the young man bluntly replied.

“Don’t be like that. Come on, you have a visitor. Now follow me.”

The director grabbed the young man’s hand. He was about to break free when he realized the director’s hand was trembling. His face was pale and bloodless, and he was obsessively checking his watch. The director was clearly afraid of something.

The young man had no choice but to follow him. The director eventually took him to the reception room—the only place in the entire factory that had been spiffed up. The smell of coffee wafted through the oak door with its metal fittings. They must have poured a cup for the guest. The young man had absolutely no idea who it could be. A visitor, for him? He no longer had any friends who would reach out to him like this. Just about a year ago, he had a large group of friends who’d come check up on him, but nobody visited him anymore. Nobody.

So who could this be?

After the director knocked on the door and let himself in, the young man soon followed. Sitting inside was the last person he ever expected to see.

“...Chuuya.”

There were two people in the reception room. One was a tall European man, most likely a detective based on how he was dressed. The other person was Chuuya Nakahara, an old friend. Chuuya stared blankly at the young man, then stood up.

“Shirase,” he said, his tone stern and deep. “Long time no see.”

The young man called Shirase grabbed a nearby vase and wasted no time in throwing it at Chuuya.



It was not the outcome I was expecting. I thought their reunion would be so emotional that they would embrace with joy. That was what happened in most of the films I watched to learn about human culture.

And yet this “Shirase” individual threw a flower vase at Master Chuuya. I tried to catch it, but I didn’t make it in time. The vase hit Master Chuuya right in the face and shattered into many pieces. The way the fragments scattered compared to the speed with which the vase had been thrown was staggering. I quickly realized that Master Chuuya had used his skill to manipulate its gravity, causing the vase to shatter into countless pieces the moment it touched him. It probably didn’t cause him much pain, if any.

Unfortunately, there were thriving flowers in the vase. In other words, there was water in the vase as well.

Water dripped from Master Chuuya’s soaked head.

“Shirase? The hell?” he said evenly without even a hint of shock. “That water was ice-cold.”

“Real convenient memory you got there, Chuuya,” Shirase replied, sneering. “Did you already forget what you did to me—what you did to the Sheep? It’s barely even been a year.”

Master Chuuya’s quiet gaze did not stray from Shirase. He didn’t say a thing, nor did Shirase as he kept his murderous glare locked on Master Chuuya. The plant director had shrieked before running off the moment the vase broke. I had no idea what this silence was about, but we weren’t going

to be able to follow through with the mission at this rate. Perhaps it was my duty to lead the conversation.

“So... Shirase, good sir. It’s nice to meet you. Lovely weather we are having today, yes?” I heard that you should talk about the weather first when meeting someone new. “There is actually something important we have come to discuss with you. Something extremely important. Please have a seat so we can talk.”

“I’ve got nothing to talk about with you guys,” Shirase said as he began walking out the door.

“Shirase, wait. Where d’you think you’re going?”

“I finished work, and I’m goin’ home!”

I stood up and went after him before he could get away, but Master Chuuya did not move a muscle. He simply remained standing in place. He didn’t even blink. I wondered what was wrong.

Come to think of it, his reaction to the vase was odd as well. He should have easily been able to dodge something like that, yet he did not. Very curious.

I was not programmed to have any troublesome features such as emotions, but I was installed with a decision-making module that mimicked emotion so as not to stand out when investigating and interacting with humans. (I always had the feeling that I would perform even better without it, though.) Therefore, I could replicate emotions such as surprise or excitement. I could also analyze others’ emotions. Nonetheless, I failed to comprehend why Master Chuuya did not move when Shirase left the room.

“Let’s go after him,” I inevitably suggested. “Is everything all right, Master Chuuya?”

He was still dripping water, but for some reason, his lips were curled into a smile.

“*Sigh.* I figured this would happen, and yet...”

We followed Shirase down the corridor as he left.

“Shirase, good sir. Please wait. We need your help.”

“Gee, sounds rough. Not my problem, though. You could offer me all the money in the world, and I still wouldn’t help Chuuya.”

Shirase's pace did not slow down.

"But helping us would be the rational thing to do."

"Who the hell are you anyway? You really know how to piss someone off, huh? Do you even know what Chuuya did to us?"

Shirase turned around and shot me a threatening glare, but his gaze meant nothing to me, since I cannot feel threatened. I could, however, comprehend the emotion he felt based on his facial expression: hatred.

"He destroyed our group one year ago. He had the Port Mafia attack us, and we ended up losing our home. Then we were scattered all over the country to keep us from regrouping ever again. All of us but Chuuya, that is. And y'know what he did then? The bastard joined the Port Mafia! He sold us out! We took him in when he had nowhere to go, and this is how he repays us!"

I cross-referenced Shirase's story with the logs in my database, but they did not match. The facts told a different story. He needed to be corrected, but Master Chuuya did not say a word. He seemed to have no interest in discussing the matter.

"And this is where I got sent to. Me—and no one else. I had to stay in Yokohama, where they force me to work and watch my every move. You know what this is, Chuuya?"

Shirase held out his arm and showed his wristwatch.

"Beats me," Master Chuuya replied.

"That is a luxury watch from Switzerland," I said upon referencing my knowledge database.

"Yep. It's the only luxury item I still have, too. I was able to buy stuff like this every month when I was in the Sheep, but now? I dunno when exactly, but I'm gonna have to sell this thing someday. Anyone could do the kind of menial work I'm doing, which is why the pay's such dirt. I'm not gonna be able to raise enough capital to rebuild the organization like this."

"Rebuild the organization?" Master Chuuya's expression changed.

"Uh-huh. You really think I'm gonna keep working at this shithole for the rest of my life? I'm slowly buying weapons and getting things ready. I'll be able to do it. I'm gonna bring back the Sheep and become an even better king than you ever were!"

Master Chuuya frowned slightly. "In your dreams."

"What'd you just say?!"

“Come, now. Let’s all calm down.”

I had no choice but to speak up, since we still had not even discussed why we came here. Humans tend to engage in petty arguments even when they should clearly be prioritizing something else.

“Shirase, sir, there seems to be a misunderstanding. According to my memory database, Master Chuuya—”

“Stop. Don’t say another word.” Master Chuuya suddenly grabbed me and stopped me. “Listen, Shirase. There’s only one thing you need to know: You’re gonna die if something isn’t done. Today or maybe even tomorrow.”

“What?” Shirase gaped.

“There’s a hit man after you—a monster named Verlaine. I’m gonna kill him, and you’re gonna help me do that.”

“What? Why would a hit man be...?” Shirase looked utterly confused; he seemed to have no idea what was going on. “Why me?”

“‘Cause he thinks I’ll have no reason to stay in the Mafia once you’re dead.”

“The hell? Why would he think that?”

“Don’t ask me to explain a crazy man’s logic.” Master Chuuya sounded like he was trying to avoid a debate. “Anyway, he’s strong. Even if the entire Mafia went against him, they’d basically get wiped out. That’s why I’m going to set up a trap to kill him. I’m gonna sneak up from behind and take him out when he comes for you. It doesn’t matter how powerful his skill is if I catch him off guard and get a clean shot...kinda like what you did to me a year ago when you stabbed me in the back.”

Master Chuuya’s gaze sharpened, and then his eyes narrowed with a different emotion. However, my emotion mimicry module was unable to determine what this really was.

“Wait, wait, wait. Lemme get this straight,” an irritated Shirase stammered as he waved his hands. “There’s a hit man named Verlaine, and you guys can’t beat him, so you’re gonna use me as bait to lure him out. Basically, you’re asking me to wait in the middle of this trap and not run away, despite knowing he’s coming to kill me. Did I get you right?”

Master Chuuya frowned without saying a word. It appeared that it was my duty to answer the question for him.

“Yes, that is exactly what you need to do.”

“Then hell no! I’m not doing that! What kind of idiot would willingly be

murder bait?!”

“Yeah, I figured you’d say that. But ya don’t have a choice,” Master Chuuya replied sharply.

“What?”

“You’re bait, but so what? We don’t need you. There’s two others he’s gonna go after as well, so we could just use them instead. Only difference is, if you don’t cooperate with us, you’re gonna die. That’s why you don’t have a choice, Shirase. You do this, or you’re dead!” shouted Master Chuuya as if to shut down Shirase’s rejection.

They glared at each other without another word. Perhaps they were searching for something on the other’s face. It was Shirase who eventually ended the silence.

“Fine. Whatever,” he griped before turning his back to us and walking away. “Still playing king, I see. Good ol’ Chuuya.”

We kept walking until we eventually arrived at the factory car park. Numerous vehicles were parked, loyally awaiting their master’s return. (And unlike humans, vehicles do not neglect their mission. It was a very soothing sight.)

Shirase strolled over to a motorcycle parked in the center of the lot. Perhaps it was what he used to commute to work. He grabbed a helmet out of the basket and turned to us.

“You win. I’ll do as you say, so take me to where we’re gonna lay that trap. I’ll follow you on my bike.”

The moment I smiled with relief, I also felt something strike the side of my cranial parts. Shirase had hit me with his helmet, and the impact caused a momentary loss of vision. He then threw the helmet at Master Chuuya, but Master Chuuya caught it right as it was about to hit his face. Shirase used this brief moment to start his motorcycle’s engine.

“Ha-ha-ha! Like hell I’d help a traitor!” Shirase cackled as he suddenly accelerated away.

“Ouch.”

I ran my self-diagnosis procedure. Impact to the head. No internal damage. No signal delay. I was simply surprised, it seemed.

Master Chuuya held the helmet with both hands and stared ahead in annoyance. “Tch... Does he honestly think he can get away?”

After a deep sigh, he tossed the helmet to the ground. He then leaped

into the air and manipulated gravity, landing atop a nearby parked car.

“Ya better keep up, tin man. 'Cause I'm not gonna slow down for you.”

I immediately began running, for I was not going to allow myself to be left behind.

Master Chuuya's movement was closer to sliding than it was to running. He reduced the downward push of gravity while creating gravity to propel himself forward like a Frisbee. Each step sent him flying down another block, effortlessly passing the moving vehicles.

I engaged the elastic actuators in my knees and leaped after him. Once I left the factory's premises and landed on a sign, I leaped even higher, this time straight over the pedestrians' heads. In the meantime, I attempted to ping Shirase's motorcycle and probe its location. However, I did not get a signal.

I hacked into the traffic control system as well, but no vehicle matched his motorcycle's description. It appeared Shirase's bike was not connected to any outside system or network. In other words, a cheap, unsophisticated model.

This worked against us because I wouldn't be able to control it remotely like I did with Verlaine's car. Our only option was to catch up with Shirase and physically stop his motorcycle. I opted for a relatively aggressive, albeit bothersome, method.

As I kept running, I accessed a traffic enforcement camera via a tool I had installed in advance that overrode the access authorization. Now my field of vision displayed an overlay of every car in the area, and I proceeded to quickly analyze the data available only to traffic police and search for Shirase's vehicle until I found it. It was two blocks west and one block north of my location.

The motorcycle was racing north toward the residential district. Shirase was obviously breaking the speed limit, so the system had already flagged his vehicle, hence why I was able to locate it so easily.

“Master Chuuya! He's northwest of here!” I shouted while leaping over a moving truck to get across the street.

Master Chuuya and I jumped over the hordes of vehicles and headed west as nearby pedestrians looked up at us in astonishment.

I connected to a traffic camera and saw Shirase's motorcycle speed through a red light and into the residential district. How reckless. But lucky for him—and unlucky for us—he had entered a narrow road with no traffic cameras. I would no longer be able to track him via camera footage.

Master Chuuya and I trampled over hedges, leaped across rooftops, and jumped over utility poles in pursuit of Shirase. Bits of shattered asphalt flew in my wake when I increased my speed.

Both Master Chuuya and I were traveling much faster than the motorcycle by now. This country lacked any pedestrian speed limit—a negligent move on the part of human policy makers. I would never have made such an oversight. If I were a policy maker, there would be laws to catch out-of-control androids.

“I can hear his bike. I'm goin' on ahead!”

Master Chuuya removed all the gravity pulling his body down and began to float. He then kicked off the side of a building and disappeared into the city. I hurried to catch up. He may be able to manipulate gravity, but my legs are far longer than his. He couldn't possibly outrun me.

We arrived in a residential area with narrow streets. According to my calculations, I would be able to catch up with the motorcycle within twenty-seven seconds. If Master Chuuya took the front, and I took the rear, then Shirase would have no choice but to give up. Things were going perfectly.

It wasn't until later when I remembered what the doctor told me: *“It will come the moment you think things are going well. The beast known as failure is always drawn to the stench of success, where it finds and devours its unfortunate prey.”*

It turned out exactly as she described. When I caught up with Master Chuuya and turned the corner, I heard him shout.

“Tin man, stay back! Hide!”

But it was already too late. By the time I rounded the corner, I saw what was taking place.

I had predicted this might happen. There were a few signs: Shirase's history; his mission to rebuild the Sheep; how the plant director seemed oddly nervous when he brought Shirase to the reception room; and how quickly the director fled said room.

Shirase was standing in the middle of the intersection. He was completely surrounded...by police vehicles.

“Buichirou Shirase! You’re under arrest for unlawful possession of weapons!”

A stocky officer was pressing Shirase’s head onto the hood of one car.

“Let go of me, damn it! I’m gonna be the next king!”

He was struggling, but according to my calculations, he would need thirty-nine others to successfully escape arrest.

“I know you’re out there, Chuuya! One of your lackeys is in trouble,” came a hoarse voice. The speaker was strangely calm considering the situation. “Come on out and save him.”

The man who called out to Master Chuuya emerged from a police car. An unassuming detective who appeared to be in his forties, he wore leather shoes that had lost their shine along with a long dark-green coat that looked like it was part of his body due to being worn for so many years. He seemed light, and his hair was fluffy like wool as it framed his affable smile.

“I’m not his lackey! I’m the king!”

Shirase was still struggling to break free.

“Yeah, yeah. That’s enough now, *sire*. Nobody cares enough about small fries like you, so you’ve got nothing to worry about,” the detective teased while patting Shirase on the head.

Master Chuuya clicked his tongue. “So you were using Shirase as bait the entire time, huh?” he said, making himself visible to the police.

“Hey, how’ve you been, Chuuya? You eating well these days?”

The detective in the dark-green coat opened his arms wide as if he were meeting an old friend, but I sensed that they were not friends.

“You’re not gonna grow big and tall if you don’t eat right, so you better get to it. Oh, and don’t forget to stay in school. You need to think about your future and start saving. No staying out late at night, either. You hear me? Granted, you should have a little fun while you’re still young, though. Oh, and one more thing.” The detective smiled before smacking Shirase. “You need to pick better friends.”

“Mr. Chuuya Nakahara, I would like you to come with us to the station. You’re suspected of conspiring with Mr. Shirase,” stated a young officer who approached Master Chuuya from the side. His expression was stiff with the cold calculation of a machine. Of course, he was still nowhere near the real thing, though.

“Now I get it. This arrest wasn’t just a coincidence, was it?” Master

Chuuya glared sharply at the officer. “So that factory director was one of yours, huh? And you were monitoring Shirase to get to me.”

“Heh. Because, unlike you, this Shirase kid’s nice to old folks like me,” the detective replied as he gave Shirase another light smack. “I mean, he basically handed us evidence of his illegal firearm collection on a silver platter.”

“Bullshit! My plan was perfect! There’s no way you got anything on me...unless...! Chuuya, did you betray me again, you rat?!”

The detective cast a sidelong glance at Shirase, who was whining and struggling. The detective then shrugged.

“See what I mean? I said to choose your friends wisely, didn’t I?”

Master Chuuya sighed. “Detective, I get that he’s guilty and all, but d’you think you could wait another day before you arrest him? We’ve run into a little trouble back at the organization, and I need to protect him today,” he said with a scowl.

The detective listened with a puzzled expression, but he soon cracked a faint smile.

“Don’t worry. We’ll protect him,” he replied. He took out his handcuffs and dangled them next to his head. “He’ll be safe in the cell we’ve got for him. You’re free to tag along if you’re worried, though.”

When the detective signaled with his chin, the other officers forced Shirase into a police car. There was nothing we could do—that was what Master Chuuya’s expression was telling me.

“Damn it...,” he groaned between clenched teeth.



“What does it feel like to be a machine?”

I still remember the doctor’s words clearly.

I could not answer her question that day because being a machine means I have no way to express what it feels like. Machines are extremely level, with no way to be misconstrued, which was why I answered as such. I then asked:

“Doctor, how does it feel to be human?”

The doctor crossed her arms and said nothing. She smiled defeatedly.

What feelings come with being human?

The significance of that question was essentially at the root of this entire incident. Verlaine claimed he was not human, and to him, that was something important enough to flip the world on its head. Being human or not, in his eyes, must have been such a significant and fateful issue that the answer would dictate who he was now and forevermore.

It is so very peculiar. Is being human truly that important? While pondering that to myself, I addressed my master.

“Master Chuuya.”

“...”

“Master Chuuya.”

“...What?”

“It is your turn. We’re playing the Name Strange Human Traits game.”

“...”

He did not respond.

“Then allow me to go first.” I tapped the table a few times. “Hmm... Humans are strange because they become embarrassed when their bodies make sounds other than their own voices: burps, farts, et cetera. It is truly bizarre. Anyway, your turn.”

I tapped the table twice for Master Chuuya, and he looked at me.

“Haaaah...” He sighed. A strange way to respond.

“‘Haaaah’? I see. Thank you for your input. I suppose it is my turn again. When the average woman mentions how cute another woman is, in most cases, the woman in question is not cute. Their reasoning for doing this is unknown. When they talk about other women who are actually cute, they say, ‘She’s a piece of work.’”

Tap, tap.

“Your turn again, Master Chuuya.”

“Ughhh...” He let out a lethargic groan.

“Fascinating. Thank you for your reply. Now for my turn: Men always lift the toilet seat when using the restroom. It is a mysterious protocol. Women, however, do not do this. Furthermore, why do men remain standing? Sitting down is far more convenient and prevents any messes. Specifically, uri—”

“Shut up! You’re disgusting!” Master Chuuya shouted.

I curiously tilted my head. “‘Disgusting’? I thoroughly cleaned myself

ninety-two minutes ago.”

“That’s not what I meant...” He scratched his head. “Argh! Just get me outta here already, damn it!”

We were in the city police’s interrogation room. The moss green walls were stained with cigarette smoke and dust. The screws in each of our chairs’ legs were loose, which caused them to rattle and wobble with even the slightest movement. The desk was covered in scratches, the imprint of someone’s fist, and light water damage most likely from a suspect’s tears.

After voluntarily accompanying the police to the station, Master Chuuya and I were brought to this room and told to wait. While we could escape, leaving without filing the proper paperwork would lead to more trouble later. Therefore, it was perhaps in our best interest to wait for the Port Mafia’s lawyer to arrive.

Additionally, being detained as an investigator turned out to be an extremely valuable and exhilarating experience for me. I was glad I hid my true identity. Thank goodness for our investigation policies.

“I prohibit you from ever asking me to play that game again. Got it?”

“Is that an order?”

“You bet your ass it is.”

There was nothing I could do about it, since he used his authoritative powers.

“Very well. I will never play Name Strange Human Traits with you again.”

Master Chuuya looked exhausted as he stared at me. “I’ve never seen ya so disappointed.”

There were no mirrors in the room, so I could not check how I looked.

“Sigh... Whatever. Just tell me this: You think the lawyer can get Shirase released?”

“While possible, it will take a while,” was my honest reply. “I hacked into the database, but Shirase’s home has already been searched. They found and confiscated twenty firearms with the serial numbers filed off. Even the best of lawyers will need a fair amount of time to get him released. Furthermore, Shirase already has a criminal record from when he was in the Sheep. It’s going to be a difficult process, especially since Shirase is not the man the city police are after. They want you. Therefore, I’m sure they plan on using the full forty-eight hours to detain Shirase

before sending him to the prosecutor.”

“We don’t have forty-eight hours.” Master Chuuya clenched his fist. “Verlaine could be coming here right now to kill him while we wait.”

He was exactly right. In order to defeat Verlaine, we needed to place Shirase in the middle of our trap as bait. In other words, we needed to ambush Verlaine, a master at ambushing his victims. However, this plan had several prerequisites. We needed time to prepare a place to trap Verlaine, and we also needed Shirase, the bait.

“Wait. Couldn’t your boss or whatever pull some strings and get him out of here?” Master Chuuya leaned forward. “The police here are basically your colleagues in a way, yeah? I mean, your country’s investigation HQ could make some calls and get him released, right?”

“That would save us a lot of time, but...” I shook my head. “It’s not possible. Our treaty prevented that from being an option.”

“What treaty is that?”

I explained the situation. Europol was originally an international law enforcement agency established from a peace treaty at the end of the war with the goal of eliminating international criminals who operated in secret across national borders. However, after the agency became caught up in a postwar multinational power struggle, several restrictions were put in place.

Among those restrictions, the rights and sovereignty of the agency’s European member states must never be undermined. Since former enemy nations had worked together to establish Europol, the agency had to be very careful not to infringe upon other nations’ rights except when absolutely necessary. In this specific case, our mission was to arrest Verlaine, a former French intelligence operative who knew many of France’s most confidential state secrets. One mistake in how we handled him could develop into an international scandal. It was also possible that the agent who ended up arresting him might sell the information they learned during their investigation to another country. At the very least, that was France’s greatest concern, hence why they were hesitant to dispatch a foreign agent.

Europol, meanwhile, was adamant about neutralizing a calamity like Verlaine who was murdering important figures around the world at random. Great Britain was especially disgraced when he assassinated several knights during a coronation ceremony. There was no turning back.

That was why the agency decided to compromise by sending me alone on this mission. After all, I would be able to keep all confidential information to myself, and I would never take any nation's side for personal gain because that was how I was programmed. Furthermore, whatever information I did learn would be encrypted and stored so it could not be used by other nations.

When Piano Man asked me how I could assure him I was not going to inform European authorities of any Mafia secrets, I replied that I couldn't tell anyone even if I wanted to. This was why.

"Interesting." Master Chuuya nodded and crossed his arms. "So you wouldn't be able to tell anyone about my secrets or the Mafia's, no matter what you see or hear, huh?"

"Precisely. European authorities cannot influence the Japanese police force either for the very same reason. Legally speaking, I am not investigating anything in Japan. If any other nation's government agency was to find out about this investigation—about Verlaine, the king of assassins—then they might try to use that information as a bargaining tool with France. After all, Verlaine was almost definitely involved in covert military operations during the war, which would violate strict international wartime laws."

"And that's why the police here aren't gonna help ya, huh?" grumbled Master Chuuya before sighing. "Great. My only ally is a reliable yet worn-out piece of machinery. Eh, I guess it's better for the Mafia that Yokohama isn't swarming with European investigators."

"We also believe that cooperating with a group not trusted by authorities to be a good compromise as well." I smiled. "The biggest problem at hand is Verlaine's trap. However, I heard the Port Mafia has the perfect skill user who could help us. Is this true?"

Master Chuuya's expression instantly changed. He scowled as if he had just swallowed an insect.

"Yeah, it's true." His voice rang of bitterness. It sounded as if he would have rather died than admit it. "But I can't get in touch with him. Whatever. Hope he's dead in a ditch somewhere."

"I see." I, however, believed that we would be in trouble if we lost an ideal player for the mission. "Can you trust this individual?"

"Trust him? No way," Master Chuuya spat. "He's a real piece of shit."

Got a twisted personality to go with it, too. He's the kind of guy who'd try to sell water to someone who was drowning. What makes him even scarier, though, is that he'd actually pull it off. He's sharp in a bad kind of way. But we won't be able to beat Verlaine without him."

"How can you be so sure about that?"

"Because he was the one who helped me defeat Verlaine's old partner, Rimbaud. He—Dazai—is the only reason I survived," Master Chuuya admitted before clenching his fist. "Damn it, Dazai. Why'd you have to disappear at a time like this?"



It was a dumping ground—a place long forgotten by all. Beneath the stormy sky lay haphazard piles of shipping containers, one on top of the other like dead bodies. Toxic substances illegally dumped in the area seeped into the open soil. Even field mice knew to stay away.

Not located on any map, this was the loneliest place in Yokohama. And near its center lived Dazai.

Dazai didn't live in a house, though. He lived inside one of the thrown-away shipping containers originally used for exporting cars to foreign countries. Inside the large container was a refrigerator, an exhaust fan, a desk and chair, a bed, and a small, naked light bulb.

Those who knew Dazai didn't dare come near his home—not even his Port Mafia subordinates—and not because of how eerie the area was. Rather, nobody knew how Dazai would react when someone invaded his private space. Perhaps he would tear off their limbs and kill them, or perhaps he would welcome them with open arms and a cup of tea. Nobody could understand how Dazai worked.

The black wraith of the Port Mafia: That was what people called him.

One year had gone by since he joined the Mafia. He was now in charge of the boss's personal covert ops unit and was producing staggering results. They had already eliminated numerous organizations and opened new distribution channels. The speed of his achievements was extraordinary, even when compared to past Mafia executives. Even the achievements of Piano Man—the Flags' founder—were child's play compared to what Dazai

had done.

And yet no one trusted him. Because the darkness lurking within his eyes was deeper than the ink black nights that hung over the dumping ground he inhabited.

The longer he worked for the Mafia, the darker and more unfathomable he became. Nobody knew exactly why, either. Nevertheless, Dazai continued to slaughter his enemies and serve the Port Mafia in order to force himself into an even darker place. His achievements were outstanding. But there was one person who did not take delight in his glory: Dazai himself.

Dazai was alone, seated in a chair in his container, quietly staring into the darkness. His phone on the nearby table suddenly began ringing. It was Chuuya, but Dazai didn't answer his call. He didn't even look in the phone's direction. He simply sat in silence, interlacing his fingers and gazing into the darkness and the door beyond it.

His eyes were exceedingly still; his black pupils were absorbing all sound and light. Nothing could escape his gaze—not even his own emotions.

The phone eventually acquiesced and stopped ringing. A deep silence once again reigned over the room—much deeper and heavier than before the phone had begun ringing.

All of a sudden, Dazai's eyes faintly moved as he gazed into the abyss. The metal door slowly started to open until the outline of a man emerged from the dim light.

"Charming place you have here, Dazai," came a lighthearted voice. "What frightens you so much that you choose to live in such a dreary place? Real estate tax?"

Dazai's expression didn't change as he replied coarsely, emotionlessly:

"It's you I'm frightened of, Verlaine."

The shadowy figure entered the container: a tall man wearing a black hat and a suit the color of the midnight sea. Judging from his playful gaze, he appeared to be enjoying what he saw.

Paul Verlaine—the king of assassins.

"You're lying," Verlaine said as he approached. "You fear nothing. I can tell by the look in your eyes. You hardly felt a thing when I tried to kill you just two days ago."

“I guess you could say I have a slightly unconventional approach to my own death.”

Only the corners of Dazai’s eyes faintly lifted into a smile, but his dark pupils remained utterly still.

“I’d be out of a job if everyone was like you.” Verlaine shrugged. His leather shoes lightly tapped against the floor as he walked to the desk and grabbed the documents lying on top of it. “So these are the Port Mafia’s internal files, yes?”

It was a stack of a few dozen sheets of paper. Selling them to another organization would undoubtedly net a person enough money to fool around and live comfortably for three lifetimes. That was just how valuable these secret documents were.

Verlaine shook the stack of papers by the side of his head. “Two days ago, you told me you would give me these files, which is why I didn’t kill you. I need them for my work, after all. But why’d you do it? What do you want in return? And I don’t want to hear any jokes like, ‘Please don’t kill me.’”

“The reason is simple,” Dazai answered with a faint smirk. Then, in a deep voice—in a nightmarish growl, he added:

“I want to see the Port Mafia burn.”

Verlaine suddenly straightened his face. He then looked at Dazai as one would if they had just realized someone had been there the entire time.

“Didn’t the Port Mafia take you in and care for you?” Verlaine carefully asked after a few moments went by.

“They did.”

“Then why do you want to see it burn?”

Dazai surely heard his question, yet he did not reply. His eyes wandered in silence as if he were searching for some far-off place until his lips eventually curled into a smile—a grievous smirk that would make anyone shriek at the sight of it.

“I’m bored of it already.”

Verlaine’s eyes narrowed. He stared intently at Dazai, seemingly in search of his true intentions.

Dazai glanced back at him, perhaps amused by this, then he muttered as if he was talking to himself, “I couldn’t find anything in the end.”

“Is that so?” Verlaine closed his eyes. “Well, I understand where you’re

coming from. You went on a journey with the expectation that you might find something to change you, but all you found was a kingdom of garbage and despair. I've been through something similar. Simply breathing, eating, and relieving yourself isn't living. That's why we make the journey."

Verlaine picked up a silver coin off the ground. There was nothing special about it. You could find another like it just about anywhere.

"I appreciate your help, Dazai."

He then flicked the coin with his fingers.

There was a deafening roar as the coin flew right by Dazai's face before shooting through the wall behind him. The air wavered, and a thunderous boom rang out when the coin shattered other metallic materials outside, flying in a straight line until it eventually disappeared into the horizon to the west. All that remained was the rising steam left from the melted metal and the vain echoes of freshly torn metal.

"As someone who shares your despair, allow me to give you the honor of being the last one killed."

Verlaine smiled, still in the same position he'd been in when he flicked the coin.

Dazai didn't move. He didn't even blink, even though the coin had just shot right by his head like a bullet.

"I can't wait," he replied with a soul-shattering smirk.

Verlaine turned his back to Dazai, then started heading for the door. But the moment he placed a hand on the knob, Dazai asked, "Where do you plan on going now?"

Verlaine turned around, smiling like a magician at the end of a magic trick, and replied:

"To the police station, of course."







The door to the interrogation room opened 1,448 seconds after Master Chuuya and I were led inside.

“Hey.”

It was the woolly haired detective who had been present when Shirase was arrested. He was holding a ceramic bowl containing some sort of liquid. He then sat on the other side of the desk and began pulling out a solid from said liquid with a pair of chopsticks. It was a shoestring-shaped substance mainly made from starch, gliadin, and glutenin. He promptly began to eat said substance.

The detective noticed me staring and lifted his head back up. “What’s the matter, foreigner? Never seen udon before?”

He smirked, then continued to eat as steam brushed against his face.

“Where’s ours?” Master Chuuya bluntly asked.

“What, you wanted some? I figured with all that money you’re making in the gemstone black market you wouldn’t care for peasant food like this anymore.”

Master Chuuya crossed his arms and glared at the man. “‘Black market’? Hold up. True, I work at a small jewelry store, but we’re licensed. You wanna see my employee ID?”

“I’m not interested in your fake ID.” The detective cocked his head and chuckled. “So who’s this foreigner with you anyway?” he asked, pointing his chopsticks at me.

Master Chuuya simply shrugged without giving an answer. The detective looked back at me and said, “Hey, Chuuya. I’m saying this for your own good. The fewer outsiders who hear what we’re about to discuss, the better.”

“Nice to meet you. I am a computer from—”

“Oh, c’mon, detective. Don’t be like that,” Master Chuuya demanded, cutting me off. “He’s new. Just started working today. He once got in a fight and took a bat to the head, and now he thinks he’s a robot. The guy’s a real riot, too, so I’ve been taking him wherever I go. Is that gonna be a problem?”

“No, I really am a computer.”

“He’s one of yours? Then it’s still too soon for him to be in a place like this. Come on, I’ll show you out,” said the detective as he stood up and knocked on the door. “Get him outta here.”

A large man in a police uniform entered the room without making a sound and grabbed my arm. I was right about to protest when I saw, out of the corner of my eye, Master Chuuya giving me a signal. He was bending his index finger toward the door from under the desk. Then he looked at me and faintly pointed his chin at the door.

It was clearly a nonverbal signal. He was trying to tell me something that he did not want the others to hear. Perhaps that was why he made up that story to get me to leave.

Hmm... Then there was only one thing for me to do.

“Very well. I will be waiting outside.”

I respectfully bowed before retiring from the interrogation room with the uniformed officer. Once the door closed behind me, the officer and I started walking.

“Excuse me, officer,” I began after we’d taken around ten steps. “What do you think it means when someone bends their finger toward the door twice?”

“...What?” The officer cocked his head curiously.

“I mean a gesture where you bend your finger like this while pointing at the door,” I repeated as I pondered the situation.

Master Chuuya was indirectly telling me to leave because there was something he wanted me to do out here as he himself was unable to leave the interrogation room. What we needed to do first and foremost was get Shirase out of this station, since he might be assassinated before we even got a chance to move him somewhere safely and set up the trap. However, the city police already knew we were trying to take him somewhere. That was why they were keeping Master Chuuya in the interrogation room, and

...Well, well.

“I understand now.”

The officer glared suspiciously at me after my sudden announcement. “And what exactly do you understand?”

“That gesture was an order. Master Chuuya was trying to tell me to

sneak into Shirase's cell and save him while he distracted the other officers."

"Oh, sneak into his cell, huh?" The officer nodded. "...Hmm? 'Sneak into his cell'?"

Oops. It appeared that he was on to me. This was not ideal.

"Officer, look over there."

I pointed toward the area behind the officer, and he instinctively looked in that direction. He was good at following orders.

I then took my already pointed index finger and placed it right where his cheek was a moment ago.

"I don't see anyth—"

He turned his head back around and was about to finish his sentence when his cheek squished right into my finger. A direct hit.

My fingertips contained microscopic needles coated with a sedative. They pierced his skin and caused him to lose consciousness. I caught him with both arms before he collapsed to the floor, then scanned my surroundings. It appeared no one saw or heard a thing.

"We must remain quiet. This is a police station." I smiled as I held him up.



Chuuya sat with the sourest of faces. His elbows dug into the table, his eyes only halfway open while he blankly stared at the filthy wall.

Why? Because he had absolutely nothing else to do. It was the only way he could take his mind off the detective sitting across the table from him.

"So I thought to myself...", began the detective as he leaned over the table. "Everything in life's just a bunch of udon toppings. Nothing good comes from having too much money at such a young age. You gotta work until you sweat from your brow, earn a little more dough than you did last month. Then it's like you've all of a sudden got *chikuwa* tempura on your bare udon. See, what I'm trying to say is that all your hard work will finally pay off, and this feeling you get is..."

Chuuya had already given up looking at the clock hands to determine how long he'd been listening to this story.

The chatterbox detective was very preachy—and didn't even have a point to top it off. Somewhere down the line, his preachy life story suddenly turned into complaints that suddenly turned into stories about his life growing up that suddenly turned into lectures. He talked in circles and repeated the same old anecdotes over and over again. Each time, he was peculiarly elaborate with the fine details. And no matter how many times the detective told these same stories, his eyes lit up with delight as if he were revealing truths that no one this world over had ever heard before.

"So when I was assigned to this station, I thought to myself: *That guy uses way too much hair gel. It looks sticky, really.*"

Chuuya wasn't listening. He simply stared at a single point in space and tried to survive. This was a voluntary interrogation session, after all. They didn't have a warrant for his arrest, so the police couldn't legally lock him up. Chuuya could have simply gotten to his feet and left. He didn't care.

But he wouldn't do that here. He had to buy time until Adam could save Shirase. Therefore, he needed to keep the detective's eyes on him and him alone. He just had to endure this, telling himself over and over in desperation: *I am but a pebble on the side of the road.*

"See, back when I was young, it felt like the end of the world," admitted the detective, nodding with a smug look on his face. "I didn't have a job. I was hungry. My brother got fed up and landed me a gig as a security guard, but it was rough, let me tell you. You wouldn't even be able to imagine it, I bet. My coworkers quit almost as fast as they started. It was either that or they ran away. I managed to survive thanks to guts alone. Yeah, that's what you need: guts."

"Hey," said Chuuya, unable to take it anymore. "How much longer do you plan on boring me today?"

The detective raised an eyebrow, then smirked as if he had been impatiently waiting for this moment. "All you need to do is sign here, and you can go. You're free to take Shirase with you as well."

He then took out a sheet of paper from his pocket and slid it across the table. Chuuya was silent.

It was a consent form asking for cooperation with evidence collection and prosecution. Specifically, Chuuya and Shirase would be released in return for confidential information. This was a plea deal.

And here, confidential information meant intel Chuuya had on the Port

Mafia.

“You’re asking me to sell out the Mafia?” he asked quietly.

“Well, you don’t wanna leave your friend here, do you?” The detective smiled, but his gaze was sharp. “Your circumstances seem complicated... but don’t worry. There’s only one thing I’m interested in: quashing the Port Mafia’s black market.”

Chuuya stared blankly at the detective before looking down at the document. Then, after thinking for a few moments, he turned his gaze back to the detective.

“Gimme your pen.”

“Be my guest.”

After grabbing the pen that was handed to him, Chuuya effortlessly scrawled something within the signature column at the bottom of the document. When the detective leaned forward to check the signature, he was met with the following words:

Eat shit.

Chuuya then tossed the pen on the desk, wrapped his arms behind his head, leaned back in his chair, and put his feet up.

“Sorry for interrupting your li’l story,” he said coolly. “Keep going.”

The detective didn’t respond. He simply glared at Chuuya with eyes akin to a heavily weathered boulder in the desert.



I was heading for the jail while pondering how I was going to help Shirase escape. What I was doing was illegal, so I couldn’t ask my agency for help. Nevertheless, it would not be a problem because I knew about the protocols of investigation agencies around the world.

The corridor leading to the jail was silent. There was almost nothing here, unlike the cluttered mess that was the criminal investigation division. The only traits worth mentioning: spotless cream-colored walls, uniformly placed fluorescent ceiling lights, and their equally uniform glow. There were the occasional dark-blue bulletin boards on the wall with notices of how many traffic accidents had occurred that month and reminders for medical checkups. Otherwise, this was a dull, boring corridor that could be

found anywhere in the world.

The holding cells were at the end of the corridor. That was where Shirase was being kept.

“Pardon me.”

I lightly tapped on the glass window into the main security office by the door. The head of security was sitting at the on-duty desk. He was large—muscular to the point that it would not surprise me if he used only his muscles to pass each test to become an officer. The office appeared rather small from what I could see through the window. Inside was a desk, eight screens to monitor the prisoners in their cells, and a computer. Hanging from the wall were the keys to each cell.

Like the other offices here, this one had serviced the station for far more years than it could handle due to an insufficient budget. It looked dreary at best. Everything was dull and lifeless: the walls, the floor, the panels, and even the officer himself.

I put on a friendly smile. “I have received orders to come pick up inmate number twenty-eight, Buichirou Shirase, for transfer.”

The head of security kept his elbows on the desk while turning only his gaze at me. “And you are?”

“I am a comp—*ahem*. I am Adam Frankenstein, an investigator with Europol,” I stated while holding out my detective badge (which was real) that I kept in my pocket. “Detective Murase has ordered a transfer.”

The man stared apathetically at the badge. “What’s the transfer number?” he asked mindlessly. His voice was even more mechanical than mine.

“Pardon?”

“His transfer number.”

His tone was assertive and dismissive. I rotated my head.

“Oh, his *transfer number*. Yes... His transfer number. Yes. His transfer number, of course.”

“You don’t have to say it three times, man.”

“His transfer number is 21988126,” I replied with a grin.

The guard then began checking the computer in front of him. I watched from a slight distance and hacked the police station’s network, took control of the e-mail server from a backdoor I had created while in the interrogation room, and copied an e-mail with past transfer instructions inside it. After

that, I rewrote the number on the screen, which was displayed the moment the head of security's computer searched for the requested transfer number.

"21988126... Yep, you're good to go."

The head of security seemed none the wiser as he unlocked the jail door for me using the control panel in front of him.

"I appreciate it. Have a good day."

When I bowed to him, he waved me off as if he could not care less.

This is why you cannot rely on humans. They are flawed. A machine would have never fallen for such a trick. It made absolutely no sense that robots always lost to humans in films before they could completely wipe them out.

Nevertheless, it is because of their defective nature that I was able to continue the mission with ease. I stepped over the threshold and into the jail proper.

The corridor in the cell block reminded me of a circuit board with how the cells and lights were so orderly arranged. There was nothing else here.

The interior was only two tones: pale light green and white, with lines drawn onto the wall to measure a suspect's height. It was perhaps the loneliest place in the entire police station.

I almost immediately found the cell I was looking for.

"Number twenty-eight. Get out. You're being transferred," growled a guard who seemed to have already received the transfer order. He unlocked the cell door and left.

Inside was Shirase sitting on a mattress. A momentary surprise flashed across his face the instant he saw me.

"Wait... You're the guy who was with Chuuya," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Shirase, it's time for us to go," I told him, but Shirase averted his gaze and pouted.

"Hmph. No thanks," he muttered, staring at the floor. "Chuuya put you up to this, right? Sorry, but I'm only here because I wanna be."

"That's a lie," I argued. "I detected an increase of wrinkles on your nose and upper lip. These are reflexive micro-expressions commonly found in people when exposed to uncomfortable situations. Additionally, humans tend to place a hand on their necks whenever they are feeling uncomfortable or anxious in order to calm themselves. It is a type of

appeasement behavior, and it suggests the person is experiencing the opposite of how they claim they feel. Furthermore, the expression you made and how you lowered your gaze suggest that you are experiencing a sense of loneliness, inferiority, and regret. In other words, you are scared.”

“I-I’m not scared!” shouted Shirase.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the guard, who was waiting by the entrance, glance this way.

Hmm. We needed to get out of here before the guard grew any more suspicious.

“We do not have time,” I patiently told Shirase. “If you wish to complain about me or Master Chuuya, then I will be glad to listen once we get out of here and are somewhere safe. What you need to do now, though, is stand up and follow me. I don’t believe that should be too difficult a task for a human.”

“I said I’m not coming with you, and that’s that,” hissed Shirase after crossing his arms—another textbook sign of defiance. “I don’t like you. I don’t like what’s happening. I don’t like how all my guns were apparently confiscated! All of this happened because you two showed up, y’know! How are you gonna make it up to me?!”

It was not our fault that his weapons were confiscated, but this was no time to argue over facts.

“Why’d I even have to get dragged into your problem? I didn’t do anything to deserve being assassinated! You need to apologize, damn it! Tell me you’re sorry! And do something about my guns that got taken away! I’m gonna be the king, so show some respect!”

I calmly listened to his ramblings. There was a hole in Shirase’s argument. I could point out the problem with his logic in fine detail, but I am the latest model of autonomous computers, not some out-of-date AI from a past generation. I would never waste my time arguing something so meaningless.

Yes. I was perfectly calm.

“Very well, Shirase.” I gave him a nod while smiling. “You are free to act as you wish. You are free to pretend to be tough, demand others to apologize, and believe that you are a king. However, I have the same amount of freedom. Therefore, I can choose to leave you here and come up with the next plan while I read in tomorrow’s newspaper about how you

were killed in your cell. I'm sure the next assassination target will be much more understanding than you."

I checked my internal feed. My emotion mimicry module—an entirely irrational module, really—was buzzing with activity and appeared to be influencing my remarks.

"Allow me to be straightforward. I do not care what happens to you," I declared. "In fact, I find you extremely toxic. According to my risk-evaluation module, I would have a higher chance of success if I left you behind and started looking for the next target instead. Do you know why I'm opting not to do so?"

I ran a self-diagnosis on my emotion mimicry module. Put simply, there seemed to be a shift toward "frustration." I could have ignored this emotional designation or even severed it since I am not a defective human, but I chose not to.

"There is only one reason why I am not abandoning you. You may mean nothing to me, but you mean something to Master Chuuya."

"I—I do?"

"Yes."

Shirase showed signs of fear due to my sudden change of attitude. "Why would Chuuya wanna protect me?"

Master Chuuya had ordered me not to divulge this information, but I felt the urge to tell Shirase. I decided to obey my artificial feelings once more. Perhaps this was what the doctor meant by *Follow your heart*.

"It is very simple, really. The only reason Master Chuuya joined the Mafia was to protect you all—to protect the Sheep."

Shirase's expression conveyed confusion. It appeared as if he could not process the information, so I decided to explain.

One year ago, the Sheep betrayed their leader, Master Chuuya, and joined forces with a band of mercenaries known as the GSS (Gelhart Security Service). This pact between the two groups had the Port Mafia, their enemy organization, on edge. Therefore, the Mafia sent their extermination unit to deal with them before they became too powerful.

The leader of the group was a young man named Dazai. Under normal circumstances, the extermination unit would have left no survivors, and the Sheep would have been slaughtered. However, Master Chuuya made a plea for the Sheep's safety, and Dazai only agreed to accept it if Master Chuuya

was willing to join the Port Mafia.

Master Chuuya agreed to the deal. As a result, the Sheep were simply disbanded, and no one was killed. They were then relocated throughout Japan to prevent anyone from rebuilding the group. The Sheep—Shirase included—owed their lives to Master Chuuya.

That deal was still ongoing. Master Chuuya would never be able to leave the Mafia, or his friends in the Sheep would be killed. The entire reason the Mafia left Shirase within Yokohama was so Master Chuuya would know who would be the first to die if he ever betrayed them.

“To put it simply, you are all being held hostage,” I calmly told him. “Conversely, one might say that Master Chuuya would have one less reason to stay in the Mafia if you were to die. That is why we believe Verlaine is after you.”

Shirase quietly stared hard at me while he listened. He wasn’t even breathing. Perhaps this was the first he had ever heard of all this.

“Nobody told me anything about that... So—so selling us out wasn’t what got Chuuya into the Mafia?”

“Far from it. He had to join the Mafia for your safety.” I allowed my gaze to wander. “Master Chuuya accepted this deal right after he was stabbed in the back, and of course, you remember who was holding that knife, yes?”

Shirase’s expression froze as if time itself had stopped.

“I cannot begin to comprehend the spectrum of human emotion, even a little,” I honestly added. “I can only offer generalizations. Master Chuuya is the kind of person who will never abandon those who have helped him, even if they end up betraying him. That is simply who he is. It would seem that was why he became the Sheep King. You, however, lack what he has. That is why you will never be King.”

Shirase clenched his teeth and growled, “What’d you just say? I... Damn it! Talkin’ shit like you know me! Yeah, I’m pathetic. Wanna rub it in some more?”

His words were not meant for me. Eventually, his voice lost all vigor until those words lifelessly bounced off the floor. His emotions were wandering in circles with nowhere to go.

I, on the other hand, felt very relieved. It was refreshing. Being able to complain to someone without any retort was an extremely wonderful thing.

With my calm and composed mind, I faced Shirase once more.

“Do you understand why your life is in danger now? This is not a joke or an exaggeration. You will be killed if you stay here. The man after your life is the greatest assassin in the entire world. You won’t last another hour helplessly locked away in this cell.”

I scanned Shirase’s heart rate and breathing as I spoke. It appeared his emotional levels were fluctuating. A positive trend.

“Now, I must be going. You are free to do as you wish, but allow me to make another generalization before I go. I do not know what the conditions are to becoming the Sheep King in the future, but I do know the type of person unfit to become a king: the kind of man who did not rely on others and was killed in his cell today.”

After saying that, I began to walk away at a relatively quick pace without looking back. However, my sonar scanner picked up on what was happening behind me. A few seconds went by until I heard footsteps wearily trudging out of the cell. I smiled.

Mission accomplished.



The interrogation room was quiet save for the sound of paper being folded. A pair of hands folded a document in half, and a finger slid down the crease to flatten it. Then after pinching the document and making all the proper creases, the hands reopened it. Finally, the corners of the document were folded along the newly made creases.

The one creasing the document was the woolly haired detective, and the document he was folding was a plea bargain.

Chuuya watched in silence. The detective clumsily folded the paper until he had completed his paper airplane, which he then threw toward the metal garbage can in one corner of the room.

The paper airplane softly floated through the air before crash-landing nowhere near the target.

“Wow, you suck,” Chuuya jeered.

“I usually get it, though,” said the detective while scratching his head. He stood up. “Chuuya, let’s go for a walk outside. Come with me.”

He started leaving without even looking back. Chuuya silently watched him for a few seconds, then eventually stood up after reaching a decision and followed.

The interrogation room neighbored the criminal investigation division, and it was as lively as a morning market. Numerous people greeted the detective as he passed through with Chuuya behind him.

“Hey, Mura! Thanks for the advice earlier. We managed to nab that man who assaulted his wife,” a middle-aged cop said brightly as he walked by.

“Glad to hear it. I told you, right? Guys who care that much about their reputation fall to pieces if you go after them at their workplace.”

“Detective Murase, congratulations on solving that violent murder. That was really impressive.” A young detective in a new suit complimented Murase in passing.

“I just got lucky. But hey, hopefully the victim can finally rest in peace.”

After walking a little farther, a detective with thinning hair called out, “‘Ey, Mura, let’s go out drinking sometime! My treat!”

“Sure, but you better not drink too much. You’re gonna get put on desk duty if you’re late again.”

Several people from various departments offered the detective known as Murase friendly banter. Chuuya almost walked right into Detective Murase’s back multiple times because of it.

Chuuya managed to make it to the detective’s side when there was a brief break from the greetings, then coldly noted, “Well, aren’t you the popular one.”

The detective shrugged. “Because unlike you, I work for peanuts, so I at least need to make sure I’m popular, or it wouldn’t be worth it. Know what I’m saying?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Chuuya replied. His eyes faintly creased into a smile.

They walked side by side for a while, and Chuuya mulled over the things he wanted to say. It wasn’t long before he eventually faced the detective with a serious expression, his mind seemingly made up.

“Detective, listen. I don’t wanna get in the way of your work, so I’m gonna be straight with you: Leave me alone.”

He wasn’t pushing the detective away. If anything, Chuuya was being

frank as he would to a friend.

“The Port Mafia ain’t like the Sheep. Even if you file charges against me, the Mafia’s lawyer’ll save my ass in the blink of an eye. I’d be found not guilty. That’s when you’ll notice the evidence has disappeared from storage, and the witnesses won’t be talkin’ anymore, either. That’s the kind of organization you’re dealing with. What you’re doing is a waste of time and effort, to be blunt.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” the detective breezily admitted, seemingly unbothered. “But I have my reasons.”

“Your ‘reasons’?”

After a brief sigh, the detective slipped his hand under his shirt collar and pulled out a thin silver chain. On the end of it was an empty brass shell casing with a hole in the center for the silver chain to run through.

“I used this on the job a long time ago.” The detective stared fondly at the necklace. “I was having money troubles when I was younger, so my brother got me a job as a security guard. I worked at this little military facility. I applied for the gig ’cause I thought I’d get paid for just standing around. I thought it was gonna be easy, but I was wrong. Dead wrong. It was a military facility near the Settlement. The boss told me not to let anyone near the place. But it was the end of the war, and there were supply shortages everywhere you went. Some kids from the Settlement appeared out of nowhere and tried to sneak inside to steal some food.”

The detective paused. He was frowning slightly, making him look like a boulder that had been weathering away in the desert for thousands of years.

“‘Shoot to kill,’ the boss said,” the detective continued, his voice strained and hoarse. “Most kids’ll just run away when you threaten ’em, but these kids who were following orders from some underground syndicate... They wouldn’t. Because they’d be killed either way if they returned empty-handed. So I...”

The detective paused again, and his unspoken words simply wandered through the air and vanished. The empty shell casing glinted coldly in his hand. Chuuya remained silent for a few moments, at a loss for what to say based on his expression.

“You were just doing your job,” he eventually replied.

“Yeah. But the memory still haunts me to this day, no matter how many years go by. The one kid was around your age.”

The detective pinched the shell casing between his fingers in disgust, but the metal cartridge wouldn't bend no matter how hard he squeezed.

"Chuuya, I'm not trying to put you away because it's the right thing to do or something," assured the detective in a cold, pained tone. "These criminal organizations spit kids out like disposable pawns, and the same thing is gonna happen to you eventually. That's why I want you to return to the world of the light before that happens. Me—and the law—can help you do that."

Chuuya met the man's serious gaze. "So that's why you keep coming after me....," he said quietly.

The detective looked back at him without saying a word.

And then there was silence.

A few seconds went by until Chuuya finally broke the silence. "I see." A self-deprecating smirk played on his lips. "But, detective..."

Chuuya's eyes had clouded over, shrouded in darkness.

"...you should probably save your sympathy for a fellow human."

All of a sudden, an alarm began blaring through the station.

"This is the security department. I repeat, this is the security department. An intruder has been spotted in the station. Number of casualties unknown. All unarmed personnel, evacuate immediately. All contracted security must be armed and in their designated positions—"

Chuuya clenched his fist and growled, "...He's here."



Rescuing Shirase from his cell was a success, although now I had to escape without catching anyone's attention. But right when I was about to place a hand on the door to the exit, Shirase suddenly spoke up behind me.

"Hold up."

It appeared he was talking to me.

I turned around. "Yes?"

He was wearing a puzzled expression. "What happened...to your left leg?"

When I lowered my gaze, I noticed that my left leg was missing from

the knee down. An alarm went off in my head. I lost my balance and staggered but managed to place a hand on the wall to catch myself.

“It must be hard being a robotic investigator.”

The voice echoed from the depths of the corridor, and I immediately faced its direction.

“I’m guessing they don’t give you paid sick leave even if your leg gets blown right off. They don’t even give you workers’ comp, either, huh? I feel for you.” A man walked this way, juggling my left calf like a baton and chuckling mirthfully.

“Verlaine...!”

The timing could not have been worse. He came too soon. We still hadn’t even prepared our trap.

I promptly summoned my Type I Combat Protocol. My electrical nerves’ conduction rate increased, and my battle analysis program’s execution was raised to maximum priority. I was going to be destroyed if I did not fight. That was all there was to it.

In order to make up for the loss of my leg, I began recalibrating my balance as quickly as possible when, without warning, Verlaine threw my torn-off leg in my direction at supersonic speed. I leaned my upper body to the side and managed to evade it; the tip of my foot ended up piercing the wall right behind me.

“Chuuya’s not with you? Good grief. He’s even late to important events like this.” Verlaine’s tone was casual and carefree, even. “I bet he would show up late to a first date, too. You know, as his brother, I worry about him. *Sigh...*”

I did not have the luxury of replying. If I lost, then that would be the end of Shirase’s life. His death would be instantaneous. In order to quickly calculate the appropriate protocol with the highest chance of survival, I could not waste time thinking about Verlaine’s statements.

I leaped as far as I could on my one leg in order to get away from Shirase—even if only a little—and I rushed toward the exit. But in spite of my efforts, Verlaine caught up with me in the blink of an eye. He grabbed my shoulders, then continued to ram me into the wall.

“Gwah...!”

The wall cracked, and my inner skeletal framework creaked.

Verlaine’s attacks did not end there. After I sensed distortion in the air

near the center of my body, a gravitational force pushed me farther into the wall. It was like a finger sinking into sponge cake. The only difference was that I was the one sinking—and straight into a hard, concrete wall.

“Don’t worry. I’m not interested in breaking you. Just stay put for a bit, will you?”

I was almost completely buried in the wall. The thunderous sound of crumbling concrete reverberated throughout my body, sending overload warnings to my main processor. However, there was nothing I could do. I tried to get myself free, but Verlaine’s gravity manipulation set every piece of rubble back in its original position. I was being buried within the very place that I needed to escape from, until I found myself stuck like a house trapped in a landslide. Only my face and part of my arms stuck out of the wall.

I tried bending myself like a spring to create the necessary amount of torque to break free but it was no use. My entire body was covered in rubble.

“Now, Shirase...”

After burying me alive, Verlaine turned around and faced Shirase instead, as if he no longer had any interest in me.

“Wh-what the...?”

Shirase’s voice trembled with fear.

“I came here to see you, but it was so easy that I actually got here a little too early, so let’s talk for a moment before I finish my business.”

“Wh-what the hell? What the hell are you?!”

Shirase’s voice quavered like never before. It took everything he had to simply stand on his own two feet.

“I-I’m not Shirase! You’ve got the wrong guy!”

“Then why did you respond when I called you that name a few seconds ago?”

Verlaine curiously tilted his head to the side. His long legs strode slowly, gracefully as he approached Shirase.

I shouted a warning: “I will not allow you to get any closer to him!”

Verlaine turned around in an amused manner. “Then stop me. That is, if you can.”

His assumption was correct. I would stop him if I could. I calculated various situations: escaping, self-destructing, remote communication, et

cetera. I searched every method available, but I ended up with zero results.

There were no effective measures. There was no way out of this. I even considered calling Master Chuuya, but that would be the most foolish strategy of all. We had decided to ambush Verlaine because we knew that we wouldn't be able to defeat him in a fight head-on.

The worst thing that could happen right now would be losing Master Chuuya or me and being unable to follow with our plan to ambush Verlaine. He had two more targets remaining. There was still hope.

"Come. Have a seat," Verlaine demanded, but Shirase was too frightened to respond. He simply looked up at Verlaine and trembled.

"Sit," Verlaine repeated sharply.

Right as he placed a hand on Shirase's shoulder, Shirase stumbled, and his knees gave out from under him. The ground beneath Verlaine's feet simultaneously cracked from the intense gravity, then heaved and bulged like a tumor. Shirase's rear dropped right on top of the protrusion. He was too astonished and afraid to even yell out.

"Shirase, I did a little research on you. As a matter of courtesy as an assassin, of course." Verlaine's demeanor became very civil. "And out of everyone in this city, you have known Chuuya the longest. Which is why I want to ask you this: What was Chuuya like as a child?"

Verlaine effortlessly pulled off the door to a cell as casually as one would pull off an old scab. He then bent the door in half and placed it on the ground, taking a seat on it and elegantly crossing his legs. He smiled at Shirase.

Verlaine's skill was an aberration. It was highly doubtful any skill user in this city could do anything about him, especially after how easily he handled the Order of the Clock Tower's knights.

I typed an internal note and sent it to Master Chuuya's cell phone as a text message. I explained the situation and strongly warned him that there was only one thing he could do: stay away from here. I told him he needed to retreat, calculate his next objective, and get the Mafia's help to lay out the trap, even if that meant Shirase and I would meet our demise.

Shirase was shaking. Perhaps he reached the same understanding as I did. He managed to open his quivering mouth and replied:

"I—I..."

His breathing was shallow, and his voice sounded fragile enough to

break at any moment. It would be no surprise if he vomited right then and there. But if he didn't keep talking, he would be deemed worthless and killed on the spot. Shirase had no choice but to answer the question if he wanted to live even a second longer. It was difficult to watch.

"I think we first met...under a bridge...where me and the Sheep used to hide and drink booze," he began while glancing at me for help.

His eyes were asking me if I could find a way out of this while he bought me some time. But it was hopeless. Help was not coming. I knew buying time would not change a thing.

"He—Chuuya—was wearing a military uniform I think he stole from somewhere. He was a huge mess. His face and hair were filthy. He wasn't wearing shoes, either," Shirase continued, voice quavering. "We—the Sheep's original members—thought he was some orphan living on the streets. He spoke to us first. 'What's that square thing?' is what he said."

Shirase looked down at the ground as if he was desperately trying to remember every detail that happened that day.

"I had no idea what he was talking about... I thought he was just weird. That's when he said, 'Tell me what that square thing is in your hand. Right now.'"

Shirase lifted his gaze and idly stared into the distance.

"I was holding a slice of bread."

A deep silence reigned over the corridor, eerily so, especially after the destruction that preceded it. Verlaine quietly listened to the story.

"When I told him it was bread, he asked, 'Can you eat it?' Then when I went 'Yeah' and tore off a piece and ate it to show him, he did the last thing I was expecting him to do. He fainted, like he was out of batteries. It wasn't until I went over to check up on him that I noticed how skinny he was. He looked half dead. The others were weirded out and didn't want anything to do with him, but I gave him bread and some water. After convincing the group, I took him with me to the Sheep hideout in the sewers."

I opened my external memory database. According to my records, the Sheep were originally a mutual-aid organization that protected orphans from adults. Their infrastructure was much smaller at the time of Shirase's story compared to their eventual peak, and they were more like a shelter for children who wanted to protect themselves from violence or kidnappers, threats of child labor, et cetera.

“We were a pretty small group back then, us Sheep. But we eventually were able to welcome Chuuya in. We couldn’t just turn our backs on a starving kid.”

Shirase looked up once more, but there was a change. He was still scared, still trembling. However, there was a cold fire burning in his eyes that was not there before—the flames of a freezing rage, of an herbivore as it howled at its enemy before being eaten alive.

“You’re Chuuya’s brother, right?” asked Shirase in what was practically a scream. “So why do you want to kill me? We were the only ones back then who saved kids like him from starving to death! And this is the thanks I get?!”

Verlaine quietly stared at him without giving an answer.

“Yeah, I know. This is just how the world works. Life’s not fair. It’s irrational, and I’m gonna die because I helped someone.” Shirase kept ranting. “Whatever. Just get it over with before I piss myself and make my corpse smell worse than it already will.”

After briefly closing his eyes, Verlaine slowly opened them and got out of his seat. He walked over to Shirase.

My situation assessment program calculated 168 different outcomes, and each one of them ended with Shirase’s death within the next ten seconds. It was inevitable. The least I could do was see him off until the very end.

Verlaine placed a hand around Shirase’s neck, and Shirase stopped breathing. That was when my real-time scanner picked up a change in the distance.

The 169th outcome. An unthinkable possibility.

“Unbelievable,” I instinctively muttered.

Master Chuuya’s kick knocked Verlaine straight back.

Verlaine’s tall body immediately crashed into the wall before ricocheting and hitting the opposite wall, destroying it in the process. He continued ricocheting off the walls like billiard balls until he slammed into the end of the corridor and stopped. Then he slowly fell forward as if he were being peeled off the wall until he collapsed to the ground, his palms out.

Master Chuuya immediately stood in front of Shirase as if to protect him

and glared at Verlaine.

“Chuuya...!” Shirase shouted incredulously.

“Damn it, Shirase. How many times is this now?” Master Chuuya spat bitterly. “Every time you cause a problem, I gotta come clean up your mess. I’m not your damn babysitter, y’know!”

“Chuuya, why’d you come here to save me?”

““Save you”? I ain’t here to save ya. I came here to kick that guy’s ass.”

I ran a diagnostic status test as I shouted, “Master Chuuya! Coming here was a mistake! You must escape! You cannot defeat him if you fight him head-on like this!”

“Oh, hey, tin man. You really look like you’re right at home in that wall over there. Anyway, just shut up and watch.”

Master Chuuya smirked before facing Verlaine once more. After managing to stand back up, Verlaine bent over and picked up his hat off the floor.

“You’re late, my dear brother,” he commented while wiping the dust off his hat.

“Ha-ha. I’m usually not the kinda guy who gets mad when someone means well, but hearing you call me brother makes me sick.”

“*Means well*”? I quietly wondered what he meant by that.

“You can feel as sick as you’d like. You have that right.” Verlaine began to leisurely approach Master Chuuya. “But I can’t say I’m a fan of your lack of strategy. What you did was foolish. Did you already forget how easily I made a fool of you just the other day?”

“Yep.” Master Chuuya casually strolled toward his opponent. “How ‘bout you jog my memory?”

It wasn’t long until they were face-to-face, within arm’s reach of each other. Master Chuuya looked up at Verlaine; Verlaine looked down at him.

The silence lasted only a split second.

Verlaine threw the first punch. His right hook sliced through the air with extraordinary speed as if it were drawn into Master Chuuya’s head, but Master Chuuya turned his face and dodged it. The next moment, he struck Verlaine’s chin.

“Gwah!”

Verlaine’s head jerked to the side. Not even my built-in high-speed camera was able to keep up with what had happened. Only after I ran a

playback analysis did I understand: When Master Chuuya dodged Verlaine's punch, he swung his lower body and hit Verlaine's chin with a lightning-fast high kick. It was a perfect strike from his opponent's blind spot that would have taken any ordinary human's head clean off.

But the storm did not end there. Master Chuuya twisted his upper body further and placed a hand on the ground, thrusting his other foot right into Verlaine's throat and causing him to groan.

Verlaine fell backward and reached out a gravity-manipulated hand in an attempt to seize Master Chuuya, who dodged by a hairbreadth before throwing another high kick. He followed with a spinning back kick.

A lightning-fast four-hit combination against an opponent taller than him, this superhuman feat was essentially a work of art. Verlaine could not even moan in pain.

"What's wrong? I thought ya were supposed to be stronger than me!"

Verlaine manipulated gravity to prevent himself from falling and tried to grab Master Chuuya without even looking in his direction. His hand possessed a fatal amount of gravity, but Master Chuuya calmly dodged. The few strands of his hair Verlaine's fingers did grab, however, were ripped into shreds by the pressure.

Master Chuuya swiftly kneed his opponent's arm away and followed with a backfist to the eye that snapped Verlaine's head back. He then kicked the inside of Verlaine's knees to bend his legs before slipping behind him and dropping a thunderous elbow on his skull, a human weak point. A roar echoed down the corridor.

Verlaine moaned in agony and tried to grab Master Chuuya above him, but Master Chuuya was already gone. He had kicked off the ground to create some distance between them—too quickly for Verlaine to keep up.

"Tsk...!"

It was an unbelievable sight. The king of assassins, Verlaine, was being toyed with. Not one person back at European HQ could have predicted this.

However, I was able to uncover how this was happening upon analyzing prior battle data. Master Chuuya had originally been using his gravity skill mainly as a method of attack, which was why he fell short against someone with the same skill but at a level higher than his. This time, however, he had changed his approach. He was sticking primarily to rapid-fire martial arts techniques. As a result, the fight had become purely a battle of hand-to-

hand combat.

Master Chuuya picked up a piece of rubble as he attacked and threw it at Verlaine, who swiftly reacted with a backfist that shattered the projectile into many pieces. Master Chuuya capitalized on this brief moment of poor visibility and approached his opponent before immediately throwing another kick—a powerful spinning back kick akin to a battering ram. Verlaine reflexively held up his arms to block but was sent flying backward. Only when he collided with the wall behind him did he finally stop.

Shards of debris languidly floated in the air. Verlaine ever so slowly lowered his arms, then wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth. His lip must have gotten cut during the barrage of kicks earlier. He quietly observed the blood on his fingers with great interest.

“It’s been a while,” Verlaine rasped. “Haven’t seen my own blood in ages.”

“Congratulations. And don’t worry. There’s plenty more where that came from.”

“You’re a world-class shit talker at least,” Verlaine said with a smirk. “Too bad that’s all you’re good at.”

As he gently touched the wall behind him, his fingers dug into the concrete like a spoon in jelly. Master Chuuya’s expression transformed.

“But while you may be able to take me by surprise with your speed, you will never be able to defeat me.”

Verlaine then expelled the rubble in his hands like bullets. With his gravity-backed fists, Master Chuuya deflected the concrete projectiles, but the onslaught did not end there. Countless fragments of concrete immediately followed one after another like the volley of a submachine gun. Verlaine had his hand on the wall and was shooting pieces of it by laterally manipulating gravity.

Master Chuuya continued knocking each comet-like fragment down, but there were too many of them. They were too quick, and there was seemingly an endless supply. He was stuck on the defensive.

“Damn it!”

Master Chuuya leaped to the side and dodged the incoming barrage of debris, but what followed him was not another concrete projectile. It was Verlaine with a lunging lariat.

The bulk of his long arm hit Master Chuuya right in the chest, sending

his feet straight up. The meteorite-like impact ran through the corridor as Master Chuuya's body swiftly broke through the wall. It was an unbelievable amount of force.

Outside the corridor wall was the underground car park for police vehicles, and Master Chuuya's body slammed straight into one of them. The car bent in half and flew backward, finally coming to a stop after ramming into a few more vehicles.

Master Chuuya collapsed forward onto the ground, and then there was silence. Utter silence.

The only sounds that followed were crumbling debris, the station's alarm—which could be faintly heard in the distance—and the bent police car's anti-theft alarm. The clamor muffled Master Chuuya's groans.

"Ngh... Gah..."

A single forearm strike had shifted the tides of battle. The power Verlaine was able to generate using his skill was staggering. Neither speed nor technique could compete with his simple gravity skill that he used to strengthen his body. His might was extraordinary.

Verlaine walked through the newly created hole in the wall and got closer to Master Chuuya.

"Wake up, Chuuya. I know you're not dead." He approached Master Chuuya and casually added, "Because I went easy on you." Verlaine then grabbed him by the neck and picked him up.

"Let...me...go..."

"Make me."

The air surrounding Verlaine's hand around Master Chuuya's neck began to waver. I detected a change of index of refraction in the air due to thermal radiation. Master Chuuya was in trouble.

"Master Chuuya! Run!"

I increased the output of every joint actuator in my body. My joints proceeded to vibrate while I probed the resonant frequency of the debris encasing me.

Objects of all kinds experience increased vibration at a particular resonant frequency. If I matched that frequency using my internal motor, I could gradually break down the rubble.

However, there was not much time left. Gravitational waves were spreading from where Verlaine was gripping Master Chuuya's neck. Heat

began spewing from the invisible gates of hell.

“Control yourself. Control your powers,” Verlaine demanded coldly.

Master Chuuya let out a scream—and as he did, black flames began spewing from his mouth.

The worst-case scenario was now reality. If Arahabaki created a black hole as it had the other day, then the entire police station would be compressed into the size of the tip of my finger before vanishing. Shirase and I were no exception.

“What’s wrong, Chuuya? Everyone’s going to die at this rate. You’re going to kill them. Your shortcomings are going to kill them. Nothing will remain. Want to give this a try?”

All of a sudden, there was the hollow echo of gunfire. Two bullets had lodged themselves into Verlaine’s arm.

“Chuuya! Are you okay?!” someone shouted from the back of the car park.

The instant Verlaine’s grip loosened, Master Chuuya kicked off his chest and broke free. He then rolled off the ground and desperately tried to catch his breath.

Someone ran over to his side—the detective who had been with us in the interrogation room earlier. I believe his name was Murase. The pistol in his hand was still smoking.

Master Chuuya broke into a coughing fit and shot him a harsh glare. “Detective... What are you doing?! Get outta here!”

Verlaine curiously stared at his bullet-ridden arm, then looked toward the detective.

“You’re finally here,” Verlaine told him. It was an odd thing to say.

Verlaine faced Master Chuuya once more. Both the high-energy rays and skill phase had ceased. Master Chuuya immediately got back on guard.

“Chuuya, I know you don’t need to hear this, but you have to be strong if you ever want to get anything in this world. You’ll lose if you keep fighting, and this entire building will be engulfed in Arahabaki’s flames, killing hundreds of people.”

That was neither a threat nor a taunt. Verlaine’s tone of voice was perfectly level and unemotional. He was simply stating what was about to occur.

“I’m not gonna let that happen,” Master Chuuya growled.

“True, that won’t happen,” said Verlaine, much to my surprise. “Do you know why?”

But before Master Chuuya could answer, Verlaine leaped into the air. He had erased his own gravity before landing upside down on the underground car park’s ceiling. He then hopped down and appeared behind Master Chuuya.

“Because my job for the day is over now.”

Verlaine’s hand was wrapped around the detective’s neck.

“Don’t...!” Master Chuuya shouted at the top of his lungs.

The detective’s mouth was open and moving as if he were trying to tell him something, but the words would never leave his throat.

His mouth twisted to one side until there was a dull *crack*, and then his head was facing backward. The momentum from the detective’s twisted neck spun his body around, and he collapsed.

“Shit!”

Master Chuuya ran over and lifted the detective’s body, but the look on his face said everything. I ran a long-distance scan and detected no heartbeat. The detective had died instantly.

“Verlaaaaaaine!”

Master Chuuya leaped forward with a shout and pounded his raised right fist into Verlaine. A black beam of light exploded between Verlaine’s hands, spreading gravitons through the air in gravitational waves and distorting the surroundings into spheres.

The expanded gravitational shock waves blasted the nearby vehicles backward as if they were made out of paper. Verlaine rode the shock wave until he landed at the underground car park’s exit.

“That’s the best punch you’ve thrown so far,” he said with a smirk before leaping backward out the exit and vanishing into the outside world.

“Wait!”

Master Chuuya ran out the exit to chase after him. He was in danger. I could not allow him to fight the enemy alone. I adjusted my intrinsic vibrations while gradually breaking the concrete in order to free myself. It took another 144 seconds until I was finally able to escape from the wall.

I hopped on one foot over to the detective as quickly as I could. His face was twisted as he lay on the ground with blood trickling out of his mouth. After a brief scan, it appeared that his vertebrae were broken from C2 to

C6. His heart had stopped. A pupillary reflex test showed no response to light. I could have called for an ambulance with my internal transmitter, but it was already evident that the man was beyond saving.

Human life is held together by a very delicate string. Unlike machines such as myself, they do not run on parts. Their kinetic systems built upon the brain and the heart lack any backups, and once either of those organs stop, it is nigh impossible to reactivate them, nor can they be replaced. In other words, humans die very easily.

When I moved the detective over to scan his back, I noticed something familiar on the ground: a cross carved from white birch. Verlaine must have left it. When I began scanning it, Master Chuuya returned.

"Where is Verlaine?" I asked.

"Disappeared. Into the sky," he grumbled, pointing up. Verlaine must have used gravity to launch himself into the air and escape.

"You could say the same for this man," I said with the detective's body in my arms. "I mean that poetically, of course."

I closed the detective's eyelids. He looked at peace.

"Damn it!" shouted Master Chuuya as he hit the detective's chest with his fist. "What happened to arresting me, detective?! I thought you were gonna show me the light...!"

When he hit the detective's chest once more, one of the man's possessions dropped out of his coat pocket and onto the ground. It was a slightly outdated cell phone model that was blue and folded in half.

I had seen it once before. It was the same blue phone that Verlaine had the smuggler get for him.

I picked it up and showed Master Chuuya. The moment he realized what it was, he let out a soundless scream between clenched teeth.

The assassin Verlaine's first target was not Shirase. But...why the detective? Why did the detective have to die?

[CODE:03] I want to see Chuuya suffer as a human

I wonder which poet first described the blue in the sky as the color of sadness.

The Yokohama sky that day was a clear blue full of such sadness. The sounds of cars coming and going, the trains passing by, the hustle and bustle of the city: Everything was sucked into the azure firmament.

Master Chuuya was simply sitting under that blue sky, halfway up the tallest building in Yokohama atop a slight protrusion on the structure. There were no handrails or safety ropes, just a few inches of protrusion between him and a drop to the surface far below.

It was impossible to observe his expression from the ground. His motionless form was only staring straight at the sky and soaking in the breeze. He had been in the same position for hours.

I was looking up at him. He did not answer my calls, nor could he hear me when I shouted his name, so there was no way I could contact him.

“The hell is he doing?” asked Shirase, standing by my side.

“Perhaps he doesn’t want to speak with anyone right now,” I replied as I looked up. There was surely only one thing on his mind in that moment: The detective was killed because of us.

After the incident at the police station, we reexamined the evidence. The blue cell phone Verlaine had requested from the smuggler was the exact same phone that Detective Murase had on him, and when I looked into said phone’s history, there were saved messages and signs of usage that dated back six years. However, the phone’s serial number revealed that it was a brand-new model manufactured just six months ago. The paint on the shell was moderately chipped, which made it look like an older model, but dating that shell revealed that these marks were created recently from fingernail scratches or falling onto the floor.

By contrast, I was able to confirm that the phone directory and call

history inside the device all belonged to Detective Murase himself, and I learned from other detectives that he had been using said blue phone regularly for years. Put simply, someone must have switched the phone with a fake that was so finely crafted that Detective Murase himself did not even realize it.

But for what purpose?

I made another interesting discovery. There were traces of some sort of program inside the device that self-deleted after a certain amount of time. Now this is merely my assumption, but perhaps Verlaine wanted to eavesdrop on Detective Murase calling someone else. Therefore, he switched out the phones and waited for the detective to make a call. The program he used to bug the phone had since been automatically deleted, which meant he had already managed to eavesdrop on the call. He had no use for the detective after that and killed him.

Detective Murase's death was preventable. If we had paid more attention to the cell phone the smuggler had procured, or if we had realized how unnatural it was for Verlaine to converse with us as if he were passing the time instead of immediately killing Shirase, then we might have been able to stop the detective's murder.

However, there was no use in allocating memory resources to something that was already over because Verlaine was most likely already approaching his next target. Furthermore, the clue the detective left for us could guide us straight to Verlaine.

"Phew... I honestly thought I was a goner back there." Shirase's harried expression looked somewhat forced. "Never thought I'd be targeted by a monster like that guy. I guess all future kings go through these kinds of hardships, unlike regular folks. It's rough out there."

"I see."

He seemed happy, contrary to what he was saying. Yet another reason why human emotional circuits make no sense to me.

"By the way, Shirase..." I began. "Why are you still here?"

"What? Why wouldn't I be here?! That monster's coming to kill me! And it's your fault! Both of you! It's only reasonable to expect you two to protect me, right? And I'm not going anywhere until this is over!"

I tried to reason with him. "But you are not Verlaine's target. It was the detective—"

“There’s still two more targets, right? And there’s no guarantee that I’m not next!”

It was a far-fetched argument, but an argument nonetheless. There were still two unknown targets. As long as there was a possibility of one being Shirase, then he needed to be stuffed into the trunk of a car and locked away until this was all over... But unfortunately, that was not an option.

“Hey, don’t look so worried! It’ll be fine! I was the brains of the Sheep, and you’re gonna have me on your side now, so there’s nothing to worry about! I’ll help you find the next target in no time!”

My arithmetic operator indicated it was highly probable Shirase was not the brains of anything but simply was useless in every other regard. I immediately shut down the operation. I did not want to know the truth.

All of a sudden, I received notification that a different operation, which I had been running in the background, finished.

“Hmm. Intriguing.”

I observed the audiovisual data that made its way to my information feed and crossed my arms.

“What’s intriguing? What are you looking at?”

Shirase leaned forward and tried to follow my gaze, but the information was being displayed over my field of vision for the sake of convenience, so obviously, I was the only one who could see it.

“The detective’s call history on his cell phone.”

“Hmm? I thought it got deleted.”

“It did. But I was able to salvage the history from the base station that relayed the call. I found the following conversation during my search.”

I began playing the analyzed data from the speaker in my throat. The audio started with static—typical when restoring encrypted audio—but it slowly began to fade until the speaker’s voice was clear.

“It’s me, brother.”

It was Detective Murase’s voice. He was talking into the phone, so his breathing was mixed in with the audio.

“The gravity manipulator came like you said he would. And there was someone with him! Just who is this guy? What’s his relationship with Chuuya?! Call me back the moment you get this message!”

Once the audio cut off, Shirase curiously tilted his head. “What was that all about?”

“The time stamp suggests the message took place a short while after Verlaine broke into the police station. He left it on the answering machine while the station was in a panic. I tried phoning the number he called, but it was already disconnected.”

“Uh-huh.” Shirase’s expression made it clear that he did not find the information useful. “So you think it’s odd that he called his own brother?”

“I do,” I replied. “Because according to the records, the detective’s brother is already dead.”

“What?”

“I took a peek at Detective Murase’s personnel file in the city police’s internal affairs department,” I explained while opening the necessary information in my feed. “According to the file, his elder brother worked at an army engineering lab as a civilian researcher. However, he died in a lab accident fourteen years ago in April. His real name was redacted and he was simply referred to as N in the reports. There wasn’t even a single picture of him. I looked everywhere.”

“N, huh?” Shirase frowned dubiously.

“Detective Murase had only one brother according to his family registry. It’s quite curious. Maybe he had someone close to him that he simply called his brother?”

“Doubt it,” came a sudden voice from behind.

“Whoa?! You scared the crap outta me, Chuuya!”

Out of nowhere, Master Chuuya was suddenly standing behind us.

Ignoring Shirase’s complaint, he continued, “That detective told me his brother got him the job as a security guard at some military facility a long time ago. Said it was around the end of the war, and that was about nine years ago...which means his brother didn’t die fourteen years ago in April. He’s alive, and the records just say he’s dead.”

“You mean...the military falsified the records?” asked Shirase.

Master Chuuya nodded. “Yeah. No real other way to explain why there’s no photos of him or records with his real name. He’s dead to the public. A ghost that can’t be found. And that’s the kind of guy the military needed.”

“But for what?” I asked.

“I mean, it’s pretty easy to guess after all we know by this point, right?” He stared at us, his gaze harsher. “The detective’s brother was probably researching Arahabaki.”

The utter shock suspended every one of my processes for 0.02 seconds. N was one of the humans who created Arahabaki...?

"Arahabaki was an extremely high-level national secret, right? The kind of secret that other countries sent their spies here to steal. Obviously, the military didn't want the researchers' addresses or histories gettin' out, so they 'killed' N and buried all his info," Master Chuuya explained. "Sounds about right, doesn't it?"

I ran some calculations while replying, "All the researchers supposedly died in the explosion Arahabaki created that destroyed the research facility. Are you saying that this researcher, N, survived?"

"Yeah, and he was probably the only survivor, too. That's why Verlaine's going after him," Master Chuuya said. "His real name is unknown, his whereabouts are unknown, and there's no way to get in touch with him. The only person that knew how to get in touch with him was..."

"His younger brother, the detective..."

"Wait, wait, wait. Hold on. This doesn't make any sense," Shirase suddenly commented.

I looked back at him. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? I mean that you guys made so many threats about it that I wouldn't be able to forget even if I wanted to." Shirase haughtily placed a hand on his hip. "Verlaine's gonna kill everyone who's keeping Chuuya from leaving Japan. That's what you guys told me! Scared me so bad I thought I was gonna have a heart attack. I mean, I *wasn't* scared. But what I'm trying to say is...!"

Verlaine's objective was to take Master Chuuya with him. Shirase was right about that. Which meant...

"In other words, N has some sort of information that would make Master Chuuya wish to stay in Japan. That is why Verlaine killed the detective. And N himself is next..."

The researcher N was high on Verlaine's list of priorities for reasons unknown to us. That was certain. Which led to the inevitable question:

"What exactly does N know, then?"

Master Chuuya shrugged. "Beats me. We'll just have to locate him first to find out."

"Wait, wait, wait! I am *not* cool with this! Stop making decisions without me!" complained Shirase. "You're gonna search for this researcher?"

The one Verlaine's obviously looking for, too? No way I'm clashing with that guy again! Take me somewhere safe and protect me, damn it!"

Master Chuuya watched Shirase flail his arms about for a full ten seconds before deeply sighing.

"What are you lookin' at me like that for?!" Shirase demanded.

"Nothing... If I told ya, it'd just make things worse," Master Chuuya said before averting his gaze. Shirase opened his mouth as if he was about to complain, so I decided to step in before things went south.

"Unfortunately, I believe Shirase has a point as well," I stated. "Verlaine is already far ahead of us on his search for N. To make matters worse, he is a former spy. He probably already knows where N is. Even if we were to begin searching ourselves and ended up learning where N was hiding, all we would find would be a dead body and Verlaine fully prepared for our arrival. There is an extremely high probability of that happening."

"No, that's not going to happen," claimed a sudden voice.

It was an unfamiliar voice. One that belonged to an adult male.

I turned around, but there was nobody behind me. Bizarre. I looked around in every direction to find the owner of the voice.

"Where are you looking? I'm right here." The voice spoke again; where was it coming from?

"Hey, uh..."

Shirase was staring at me strangely, as if he had just seen a ghost. That was when I suddenly realized what was going on.

I was the one speaking.

"You didn't cover your tracks after accessing the military's information terminal, so I traced them and found you." My mouth moved, producing words in an unknown man's voice. "We both have secrets we need to keep, so I apologize for my rude behavior."

I immediately ran a diagnosis. A third party had hacked into my feed. Disgusting!

Fortunately, they hadn't installed any malware that could alter my system or killware that could cause me to lose control. But it still felt absolutely vile. It was time to cut off the hacker's connection.

"Hold on. Don't cut the connection just yet." Master Chuuya raised his hand to stop me as if he knew what I was going to do. He then faced me and asked, "Who are you?"

“Someone who needs your help.” My mouth was moving on its own. “And someone who could help you as well. I’m the man you call N.”

“So you’re N, huh? How convenient.” Master Chuuya snorted. “But what’s with the sudden call? I figured you’d prefer to stay hidden.”

“The tides have changed. I’m sure you all must have realized this, too,” freely continued the unfamiliar voice. I was honestly getting sick of putting up with it. “I’m going to be killed by the greatest assassin in the world at this rate, and the truth will be forever lost to the darkness along with me. I’d die before ever telling you all the truth—whereas, if I told you the truth, there would be no point in killing me anymore.”

Right as I was vowing to pull my own tongue out if he talked for ten more seconds, N suddenly made a wonderful announcement.

“I can’t say any more here, though. I need you to come meet me. I’ll leave my address in the robot’s feed.”

Master Chuuya quickly replied, “Hey, wait. You want us to come see you? What exactly do you know?”

“Everything, Chuuya. Everything about you,” the voice claimed in a calm, detached manner. “I can’t wait to see you.”

The connection suddenly cut off. I wanted to let out a sigh of relief, but Master Chuuya seemed to feel quite the opposite.



I drove up an unpaved mountain path, the car rattling until I stopped near our destination. This countryside location outside of the city was where the man known as N, the rude individual who hacked my mouth, instructed us to go.

The evergreen broadleaf trees such as stone oaks formed a natural roof over our heads. It had been raining just before we arrived, so the bumpy ground was drenched in mud. There was no sign of any humans in the area, but my scanner found countless insects staring at us.

I picked up a berry from the ground, wiped it off, then consumed it in one bite. It was delicious.

“Ew...,” Master Chuuya grumbled in disgust as he watched.

Shirase, who was walking slightly behind us, suddenly spoke up. “I

don't think we should do it. This is a bad idea. Let's just go home. There's not gonna be anything good here; I guarantee it."

I looked back at him after hearing him say that for what felt like the thousandth time.

"My legs are killin' me. I'm sick of this. I don't wanna walk anymore. Hey, mechanical English gentleman. Think you could carry me on your back?"

Master Chuuya and I exchanged glances.

"You're free to go home, Shirase," he taunted.

"Me? Go home? No way! It's your job to protect me, y'know! I'm not leavin' your side no matter what!"

Master Chuuya faced forward once more, then scratched his head, an exhausted expression on his face.

"Sigh... Somebody call a wahmbulance for this guy, seriously."

"Excuse me? Hey, Chuuya! Do you really think you should be talkin' to me like that? Do you know who I am? I'm the generous soul who saved your life when you had nowhere to go and no memories of your past," Shirase boasted with a waggle of his eyebrows.

It was hard to describe Master Chuuya's expression then with only a single word. To be specific, he looked like he wanted to smack Shirase in the head with a hammer, but he didn't have a hammer on him, and he didn't want to have to use his bare hands, either. It was a fantastic expression, so I took a picture and saved it in the folder titled FAVORITES in my storage.

Master Chuuya sighed. "Fine. You can come with us, so ya think you can be a little quieter?"

"See? You can't beat me in an argument, Chuuya. That's why I'm the king!"

I heard Master Chuuya mutter, "I'm this close to punching him in the face right now," under his breath.

If anything, I was extremely intrigued by how a talented high-level member of a criminal organization decided to speak so softly that the person he was talking about could not hear him. We continued our exchange until we arrived in front of our destination.

"This is it."

It was a barn.

The wooden building was meant for storing hunting and farming tools in the mountains. It was debatable whether this could be called a building, however.

The rotted wooden walls were halfway peeling off the structure, exposing the interior to the elements. Years of rain and wind damage meant hardly any of the thatched roof was left except for the bare framework. The blackened posts supporting the barn were so decayed that they looked like they dated back to the Stone Age. They were full of holes left by insects.

Inside the barn was a wheelbarrow missing a wheel, a torn sieve, and ripped bags of fertilizer with their contents scattered about.

“What the hell is this place?” Shirase sounded disappointed. “It’s just an abandoned old shack.”

“This is the place.”

I grabbed a hatchet hanging on the wall. The grip was rotting and bent halfway down. After scanning the barn’s interior, I inserted the hatchet into an opening in the floorboards, then gently pushed it forward until I heard a metallic *click*. The floor instantly began descending at an angle.

“Whoa?!”

The floorboards slid downward from the barn’s exterior walls, and the mountainside scenery slowly disappeared into the sky. In its place, black concrete walls with a metal railing came into view.

The barn’s floor was an elevator that was taking us underground. The inside was lit up by red guide lights fixed to the walls, their crimson glow rhythmically illuminating our faces.

“Nice,” said Shirase. A childlike grin slowly spread across his surprised face. “It’s finally startin’ to feel like an adventure.”

Interesting. So this was an adventure. Adventure was a classic theme in film. I’d heard that everyone got a thrill out of adventures.

“Yeehaw!” I shouted while jumping into the air and pumping my fist. Perhaps I was gradually becoming more humanlike by the day.

Master Chuuya rolled his eyes.



After the large motor stopped running, we got off the elevator and found

ourselves in a dim corridor. The gray walls were painted with black-and-yellow hazard stripes. We followed the path straight ahead as if it were inviting us into the darkness of the abyss.

The courtesy lights on the floor faintly illuminated our faces. I sent a ping signal up ahead and received a response from the facility's system a few seconds later. There was no doubting it. We were going the right way.

After taking a right at the end of the corridor, we advanced even farther into the abyss until we passed through a double fireproof wall and found ourselves in a spacious underground depot. At the back of the tennis court-size area was a colossal fireproof partition wall with a small security station in front of it. All four guards stationed there—two inside, two outside—were armed and looking in our direction.

Their eyes were empty. They took nothing about us into consideration, not our facial expressions nor who we were as people. All they saw were three suspicious individuals.

"Halt," the closest guard instructed in a firm, mechanical voice.

Master Chuuya stopped in front of the muzzle of the man's gun.

"We have an appointment. Let us through," he demanded calmly, as if the gun did not even exist. When the guard looked back, another guard faintly nodded to him.

"We heard. But this is a top secret facility. We'll need to examine your belongings and perform a blood test before letting you through."

"A blood test?" Master Chuuya raised an eyebrow. "What for?"

"You three don't even know what kind of facility this is?" The guard sighed with contempt. "How pathetic."

"The hell did you just say, you punk?! Do you even know who I—? Mmm!"

"I am sure everyone knows who you are, so I believe keeping silent would be your best option."

I covered Shirase's mouth before he started a fight.

We ended up having our belongings inspected and our blood collected.

The guard pressed a box-shaped blood-drawing device against Master Chuuya's wrist. He said nothing as they took his blood. When I heard the sound of air being released, I knew it was over. His expression still had not changed one bit.

Shirase also had blood drawn from his wrist.

“Ouch! Whoa! Hey?! That hurts, damn it! Ow! You shoulda said it hurt before you pricked me, you jerk!” He flailed his free arm as if this was the most pain he had ever felt in his life.

I was next. The sound of air pressure being released was followed by the needle breaking.

“...”

The guards and I made eye contact. I didn’t say a word. Nor did the guard who was holding the kit for drawing blood. He used a spare kit on my legs, neck, lower back, and every other place he could stab, but each needle broke. Before long, there was a commotion in front of the station.

“Bring me a knife!”

“Where was that saw again?!”

More guards gradually arrived until the entire security team tried to draw blood from me. All their attempts ended in failure.

After exhausting their resources, the guards stared at me and panted heavily, out of breath. I stood there with a blank expression and waited for them to draw my blood. A mysterious silence followed.

I extended my neck until the inner joints were visible, then began to bob my head while I walked.

“Look. I’m a pigeon.”

“Ahhh?!” The guards fell backward.

“Quit messin’ with them!” Master Chuuya smacked the back of my head.

The guards eventually called headquarters and had me exempted from the blood test.



The security guard guided us to the facility’s innermost depths. The interior was surprisingly not worth mentioning. There was nothing more than a white corridor with six doors on each side, none of which were numbered.

Turning at the end of that corridor brought us to another corridor with six doors on each side. That was not surprising in the least; this facility was purposely designed this way to make it difficult for intruders to find what they were looking for. The reason why there were many turns was to

prevent any gunfire from traveling long distances.

In other words, there was something top secret here that they did not want stolen under any circumstances.

The security guard typed something into the terminal at the end of the corridor and opened what appeared to be an ordinary wall that led farther into the facility. (My scanner had already discovered there was an area even farther back.)

The back room was the research department, which was relatively spacious and full of people.

Researchers wearing white lab coats bustled through the corridors. One was debating something with a colleague. Another was rubbing his eyes as if he had just awoken. Yet another researcher was frantically trying to wash a coffee stain out of her lab coat. There was even a man who clearly had not slept for three or so days.

Militaries, police forces, and criminal organizations have their own distinct features throughout the world, but researchers are the same wherever you go. Even the ones in Great Britain hardly differed from the people here. They had a very laid-back demeanor no matter what they were studying, which was perhaps due to the fact that most of them lived here in the facility.

We took in the sights until the guard behind us urged us to keep moving forward with the tip of his gun.

“Don’t stop and don’t look. Anyone interested in the research we’re doing here doesn’t get invited.”

“Uh-huh. Neat. You cocky little...,” Shirase began muttering to himself.

I carefully collected various data until a few things became clear. This appeared to be a military research division that had been studying special powers since before the war. That much became evident as I analyzed the conversations of the researchers we passed by. I would have loved to gather more detailed information, but this was a secret military facility. All electronic devices were protected from hacking and rejected any external connections. It would most likely take a lot of time and resources to bypass them.

However, that information alone was enough for now. After pondering for a few moments, I spoke up.

“I was thinking, Master Chuuya...,” I whispered at his side. “The reason

why N is Verlaine's next target... Perhaps he has evidence that you're human."

"Huh?" Master Chuuya looked back in surprise. "Where'd that come from?"

I viewed my data logs while continuing, "We do not know whether you are human or merely an artificial equation. Verlaine claimed you were an equation, but he did not offer any evidence to back up his claim. His word alone is all we have to go on, and that is exactly why he wants to dispose of those who know the truth—the truth that you are human. Because you would not need to go with Verlaine if you knew the truth. That is why Verlaine decided to target N. Everything would make sense if this was the case. Would it not?"

"But why would Verlaine even lie?"

"Because he could not convince you to come with him otherwise." I was confident this was the truth. "He needs you for some reason, perhaps because like him, you can manipulate gravity, and you received said powers at a military facility. However, simply telling you to abandon the Mafia and join him would not work."

"So the fact that he's trying to kill N is proof that I'm human?"

"Precisely."

Master Chuuya appeared to be racking his brain over the subject. He faced the wall, scratched his forehead, scratched his nose, and crossed his arms. He then covered his face and hid his expression. I could hear him exhaling in short bursts. And then there was laughter.

"Pfft. Ha-ha-ha... You're such an idiot." He let out a brief, exasperated chuckle. "So I *am* human, after all. I feel stupid letting something like this bother me in the first place..."

I smiled as well because it felt like this was the first time I had seen him smile in a very long time.

"The hell are you lookin' at?" Master Chuuya glared over his shoulder at me while keeping his face hidden. "What are you grinning about? I'm not happy about the news. I'm *indifferent*."

"So am I."

As an extraordinary piece of machinery, I am able to lie with a straight face.

"Then how do ya explain those eyes?!"

“My eyes? I use them to see.”

“I’m startin’ to figure you out.” Master Chuuya pouted as he glared at me. “You’re playing dumb on purpose, aren’t ya?”

He saw right through me. After turning around and stretching in a forced manner, he began briskly walking ahead.

“Anyway, let’s hurry up and get this over with! Looks like we’ve got an easy job to do today!” he shouted to no one in particular.

My lips could not help but automatically curl into a smile as I watched Master Chuuya walk with a spring in his step.



Our journey brought us before a certain door. After pressing the call button next to it, the guard stated the purpose of his visit.

“Come in,” said a voice as the door automatically opened. It was the same voice that took over my vocal mechanism once before. A disgraceful voice.

Behind the door was a spacious office. The window in the back was a computer-generated view of the beach, despite the fact that we were underground. The walls were completely hidden behind floor-to-ceiling oak bookcases. Technical books from around the world dutifully lined the shelves.

At the back of the room was an antique desk with a man lying sprawled out in front of it underneath a large box. He seemed to have crawled under the box and was doing something, but I could not see his upper body. All I could see were his lower body and the soles of his shoes pointing toward the ceiling.

“Sorry. Give me a second, okay?” he requested. “Adjusting the experimental isolation tank is taking a little longer than I thought. This tub was made to induce an altered state of consciousness and raise the output of special powers, but the gauge, the most vital function, is interfering with the tub’s magnesium sulfate solution. So right now I’m trying to exchange the positron decay gamma ray detector with something more precise.”

“Why not simply implant an active marker in their blood vessels instead of relying on noninvasive measurements?” I suggested.

“I tried that,” came the cheerful reply. “But that presented us with a new problem. The subjects’ skill activity potential gets all staticky. The human body can be very nonsensical at times, unlike yours... All right, that should do it.”

The shoe soles—and the wearer of said shoes—crawled out from under the coffin-like box before wiping his hands and smiling at us.

“Now, where should I begin? I’m sure you have plenty of questions, right? And I can answer all of them. You could basically say this is the final destination of your journey.”

That face. There was no question about it.

“You... I’ve seen you before,” Master Chuuya said tensely.

“I figured you’d say that first.”

Master Chuuya took a picture out of his pocket and stared at the man. It was the photo of him at five years old at the beach while holding hands with a young man in a linen *yukata*. The young man was smiling cheerfully, squinting from the bright sun.

“I was in charge of Project Arahabaki, and N was the nickname the military gave me. N being the first initial of Nakahara. In other words...”

The young man in the picture looked identical to the researcher in front of us.

“...I’m your father.”



The video showed a golden coin. One side was engraved with a fox, the other with the moon. It was beautiful yet somewhat melancholy.

Someone was twirling the coin between their fingers. They were young fingers, but everything past their arm was off camera, so it was impossible to see who exactly the person was. They were, however, speaking in an almost singsong manner.

*“Upon the tainted sorrow,
no hope nor want of anything.
Upon the tainted sorrow,
to idly dream of death.”*

It was an intriguing poem. The words were not meant for anyone. They simply fell to the ground; it almost felt as if they would continue falling forever.

As the poem was being recited, the golden coin began to emit a mysterious glow.

The screen changed.

Someone was holding a glittering coin in the center of the screen, but the camera was too far away to make out their face. The only thing discernible was how oddly spacious the concrete chamber was.

The white light being emitted from the coin gradually changed into a vicious crimson until the entire screen was red.

The screen changed again.

The next video was of an observation room that looked over the large concrete chamber. One of the walls was a thick panel of Plexiglas; the chamber and the coin's glow were visible from within.

"Confirmation of deep skill lock code within the subject. Launching protocols eight hundred and six through eight hundred and seventy-two."

There were around a dozen researchers attending to their own calculations on this side of the Plexiglas.

"Confirming expansion of special-ability light. Gradient increase is three hundred and twenty percent over the maximum allowable value."

"Don't stop just yet."

The coin's light grew even brighter and faintly illuminated the researchers' faces. The light began to pulsate as it turned various shades of crimson, each darker than the last, until it transformed into a pitch-black mass that swallowed the light.

"Gamma ray detector has exceeded its sensitivity limit. Internal temperatures rising."

The space itself in the chamber began to change as well. The floor rattled as pieces peeled off and were drawn toward the coin. But before they made impact, the pieces of flooring were crushed under the gravity, then pulverized into a fine powder before disappearing. Soon the space surrounding the coin began warping.

"Visual confirmation of spatial distortion! Apparatuses two through six, ten, and fourteen have been destroyed!"

"Subject's vitals are reaching critical levels—no, subject is now in

cardiac arrest!”

The walls of the spacious test chamber were breaking away along with the floor, each piece successively crashing into the light. The room was no longer even retaining its original form.

“Abort! Begin pumping water from the emergency tank!”

All of a sudden, the space instantly contracted. The chamber itself twisted as it was drawn toward the individual with the coin.

Then came a flash of light and an impact. The screen violently shook until the Plexiglas separating the observation room and test chamber shattered into thousands of pieces and scattered everywhere. The researchers floated in midair.

There was a scream, and then the screen faded to black.



“What even are skills to begin with?” asked N as he walked us down a path even farther underground. He was taking us to an underground laboratory to tell us what Verlaine did not want us to know.

“To tell the truth, we researchers have almost no idea what skills are, either. It’s kind of embarrassing to admit after setting up such a magnificent research facility like this one.”

We listened to his monologue while descending the stairs. N was in the lead with Master Chuuya slightly behind and Shirase after him. I was in the very back.

“However, there are a few things we do know,” continued N, his tone light. “First, we know that no other organisms aside from humans can possess a skill. You won’t see a plant or a monkey with one, for example. Furthermore, humans can be born with only one type of skill. If the person with the skill dies, their skill disappears as well, for the most part. Also, no skill on its own can raze the entire planet in the blink of an eye. So in other words, there’s an output ceiling to these special abilities.”

“Yeah, even I know that,” Master Chuuya cut in apathetically.

“This is where things get interesting, though,” N said with a mischievous smirk that hid his true intent. “I said there’s an output ceiling, but the military wanted to know if there was any way they could go beyond

that limit. And as it turns out, there kind of is. One method relies on skill singularities.”

Oh?

I was impressed he knew what a singularity was, and not simply in theory, either. He was a researcher who worked for the military studying the subject. Only a select few researchers in the UK knew of the phenomenon. It appeared that skill research in this country was far more advanced than previously thought.

“Only a handful of people in the government know about this, but a singularity is when multiple skills interact with each other and develop into an even higher-level skill phenomenon completely different from the original ones,” N went on. “Anyway, the rules for maximum skill output don’t apply to the skill phenomena created by a singularity. Anything can happen. You could call this extraordinary event an error of special abilities—a skill fallacy.”

The stairs came to an end, and we found ourselves at the bottom floor. The only noise that could be heard this deep underground were the sounds of our footsteps.

In front of us stood a door. N took the key he had strapped to his waist and unlocked it.

“So where are we even headed? And where were you going with that drawn-out story, too?” Master Chuuya demanded.

“You’ll find out the answer to both of those questions very soon.” N smiled cheerfully. “This story is about the nature of your existence, so listen carefully, okay?”

He then continued his explanation.

“Now, a singularity is an extreme outlier when it comes to skill phenomena, but there’s nothing extreme about how they occur. The easiest method is to use two contradicting skills against each other. For instance, a skill that can always deceive its opponent versus a skill that always reveals the truth. Or you could have two skill users who both can see the future fight each other. Usually, one skill will beat out the other, but in some rare cases, you get a completely new skill different from the original two. This is what we call a contradictory singularity.”

When I glanced to my side, Shirase was mumbling, “Mmm... ‘Contradictory...’ Mmm...”

“Shirase, I understand that this is a difficult subject, but please try to stay awake while you walk,” I told him.

“Now, Chuuya...”

N was speaking to Master Chuuya by his side. He was clearly pretending like he did not even notice Shirase’s existence.

“I told you that you needed at least two skills to create a singularity, right? But some people out there can create a singularity all by themselves.”

“What?”

“They don’t need another person’s skill. Instead, they can create a point of singularity by colliding their own skill against itself,” N said before he began to twirl his index finger. “The German researcher who first discovered such an ability called it a self-contradicting skill. Hmm... Let me give you a real-life example. Once there was this boy who could amplify the skill of anyone he touched. Super convenient. So what do you think would happen if he used it on himself instead of someone else?”

“I mean, I guess he’d just amplify his own skill, right?”

“Exactly. In other words, he amplified the skill to amplify the other skill, which amplified the skill to amplify skills that amplify skills. This self-referencing continued nonstop as he endlessly amplified his own skill. The resulting infinite loop of energy violated the principles of special abilities and created a singularity. The excess energy was converted into mass, which created a high density warp in space. The boy was sucked into the giant whirlpool of gravity and taken away to the other side, never to return again.”

Interesting. It all made sense now.

“So that was the skill user with the coin from the video earlier, correct?” I asked.

“Exactly. It was a destructive skill, the kind activated just once in a lifetime.”

“...Wait. Don’t tell me that warp in space is—”

Master Chuuya’s voice was stiff, his expression tense.

“Hold on. Let me finish, first,” N said, interrupting him. “A self-contradicting singularity can occur not only in Germany and Japan but all around the world as well. It happens once every few decades. In ancient times, people used to believe these phenomena were the work of God or demonic beasts, but nobody knew exactly what happened as a result. After

all, the creator of the singularity would always die along with it.”

While Germany, France, and England were fighting for power on the battlefield, their military researchers were engaging in fierce competition of their own. It would be no surprise if Japan, Germany’s ally, happened to end up with some of Germany’s skill weapon research and technology.

“These skills are dangerous; they not only kill the user, but they suck in every other surrounding individual as well. And they can only be used once, to boot. That’s why you can’t really call a singularity a weapon,” N said with a stern look on his face. “But it’s also true that it provides a near-unlimited supply of energy. How would you be able to extract it as a controllable resource, though? That’s the question that jump-started the entire study. And before long, one country figured out how to *actually* use it as a weapon. One of the world leaders in skill research: France.”

France. A spy for the French government. The king of assassins.

It finally made sense.

“They turned a singularity into a weapon? But how?” Master Chuuya asked.

“With the heart.”

“What?”

“The heart. The human mind,” N intoned almost as if he were reading a poem. “Normally, you would use some sort of device if you wanted to manipulate a massive energy source, right? But as I mentioned earlier, humans are the only organisms who can use these special abilities. In basic terms, you could say that only the human soul can use the energy of a skill. That’s where a French researcher decided to use a cloned body combined with a persona model to make the skill *think* it was human and had a soul. Tsk... Even I’m disgusted by the idea. But they were successful—terrifyingly so. And born from their research was the spy and skill user Verlaine: a skill with a personality and the ability to manipulate gravity from a singularity. A few years went by until those of us in Japan got our hands on the French research paper and tried to create a skill singularity using the same method. And that...”

After a heavy sliding door opened, N had Master Chuuya go in first.

“*That* was Project Arahbaki,” N revealed with a serious expression as the door swiftly closed behind them.

Shirase and I were left standing in front of the door; it took me 0.03

seconds to realize what was going on.

“Master Chuuya!”

I slammed my fist against the door, but the bulletproof and explosion-resistant material was extremely hard. There was no indication that it would give way. N’s voice came out of the intercom next to the door.

“*Chuuya and I need to be alone for this,*” he stated in a flat, emotionless tone. “*Project Arahbaki is a national secret, after all. Plus, I only got permission for one visitor. And besides...*”

A moment went by as if he was briefly thinking about what to say next. N then continued:

“*Chuuya should probably see this alone. I doubt he’d want anyone else, especially his friends, to witness this.*”

All of a sudden, I felt a large object moving on the other side of the door. When I scanned the area, it appeared that the other side was an elevator. Master Chuuya and N were most likely going even deeper underground, which astonished me, since we had already traveled so far down.

I tried hacking into the elevator’s control system, but I couldn’t. Not because of some sort of defense mechanism, but because I couldn’t get any wireless signal.

That was when it hit me. This was what was commonly referred to as an electromagnetic anechoic chamber.

The concept is simple. Lining a room with plates made of conductive metal such as iron will reflect radio waves, creating an isolation chamber that electromagnetic fields cannot penetrate. It is the same principle as putting a cell phone into a microwave and finding that it doesn’t receive any signal.

The estimated safety value of this mission decreased by 7 percent. I was in a state equivalent to the human emotion of anxiety.

What was N after?



The elevator’s motor sounded. Chuuya’s expression didn’t change, even after being separated from his friends. He simply shoved his hands in his pockets and observed N’s face as if he were staring at a clock on the wall.

“You really thought you could trick me like this?” Chuuya said after a few moments passed. His voice was dry, hollow.

“I’m not trying to trick you at all. I was simply looking out for you.”

“Just so ya know, I’m gonna fill my boss in on whatever you show me,” he replied apathetically. “I don’t give a damn about any national secrets or whatever.”

“Be my guest.” N flashed a suggestive smirk. “Who knows if you’re going to still feel that way after learning the truth, though.”

The elevator faintly rumbled while they descended before eventually stopping.

The door opened. There was a short hallway up ahead. While the interior was no different from the facility above, the dirt and dust piled by the corners of the floor showed the area’s age. At the end of the hallway was another door with various notices plastered on it such as QUARANTINE and DESIGNATED SEALED DEPARTMENT BY ORDER OF THE DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE. The edges of the old papers were tinged yellow.

N tore off the notices one by one. Chuuya watched him out of the corner of his eye.

“Just tell me already,” Chuuya suddenly said as if he didn’t care about the answer. N turned around. “Just tell me. It’s not like it’s gonna scare me or anything. I’m not human, am I?”

N didn’t answer Chuuya’s question but simply looked silently back at him instead.

“After hearing you ramble on like that for so long, I’d be stupid not to realize it,” Chuuya continued brusquely. “I’m the product of Project Arahabaki. In other words, I’m a singularity with a will of its own, and I was made using the same method Verlaine was created with. Right?”

N smiled uncomfortably. “What would you do if you were? The truth is behind this door. Are you afraid to find out? Would you rather I tell you now, so you can go home without having to see it for yourself?”

Chuuya didn’t reply. He just glared wordlessly back at N.

“I’m fine with that if that’s what you want. The only thing important to us is to have Verlaine believe that you know everything. You don’t actually have to know everything, though.”

Chuuya stared at the man while apparently racking his brain over

something, but before long, he spoke up once more with firm resolution in his voice.

“Piano Man and the others tried to investigate to see who I really was, and because of that, they got killed.”

There was something reflecting in his eyes that was not there. It was a past memory—he was looking at his friends from behind.

“Take me inside. I have an obligation to know everything for their sake.”

There was no hesitation in his voice, and there was no possible way to ever get him to change his mind. That was what the power behind his words was conveying.

N grinned. He then opened the door in place of a reply.

On the other side of the door was what appeared to be a large factory so massive that the back wall couldn’t even be seen. Between the floor and the ceiling was a mesh foothold that acted as a second floor of sorts that Chuuya was standing on.

The mesh flooring creaked. Chuuya’s knees buckled, but he managed to grab onto the railing to prevent himself from collapsing.

“Are you okay?”

“I know this place,” responded Chuuya with a pale expression, ignoring N’s question. “I *know* this place, damn it.”

“I know you do.”

Sweat began to drip down Chuuya’s forehead. His eyes remained focused on his surroundings. After emotionlessly looking down at Chuuya, N began to speak in a monotone as if he were reading numbers from the phone book aloud.

“This is Research Facility B. It was modeled after Research Facility A, which was located in the Settlement. The layout is exactly the same. This is the closest thing we have to your birthplace since the explosion destroyed the other facility.”

Phantasmal voices echoed in Chuuya’s head.

“Intruder!”

“Seal off doors eight through fifteen!”

“I want the Ops Division equipped with class A gear and prepped for an ambush!”

Before he even realized it, Chuuya was walking.

It looked exactly the same. The same sights he'd been so used to staring at all those years and years.

Soldiers and researchers came and went. Armed soldiers ran past Chuuya.

It was an illusion. There was nobody there. It was simply a memory from his past.

"How many intruders? Are they armed?"

"Two intruders, both unarmed!"

Screams echoed in his head. It was a memory of *that day*. The last time Chuuya ever saw this place from that view. His legs eventually carried him to a specific location.

"You were inside here."

It was a black cylinder that extended to the ceiling, roughly wide enough for three adults to wrap themselves around it. The surface appeared to be glass, but it was opaque and black, making it impossible to see what was inside.

However, Chuuya knew. He knew what this was.

He turned to face it. It was something he was intimately familiar with.

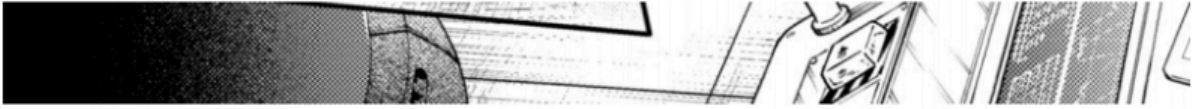
This cylinder had been his whole world—at least, so he'd thought. A bluish darkness. A cradle to separate him from the outside world—and to protect him from it.

But that cradle was suddenly destroyed by an unknown illusion. The cylinder shattered as someone's hand grabbed Chuuya.

Chuuya remembered that hand. It was Arthur Rimbaud's. And next to Rimbaud was Paul Verlaine.

"Your existence is miraculous, Chuuya," N marveled as if in song. "In the end, we were unable to repeat the same phenomenon here as we did with you."





Those words dragged Chuuya back to reality. It was just N and him. The cylinder was still intact.

Chuuya placed a hand on the cylinder's surface. It was neither cold nor warm. It was a temperature he knew very well.

"...So?" Chuuya faced N after managing to regain his composure. "What kind of national secret does this place—?"

Bam!

Something had suddenly hit the glass from the inside.

Chuuya froze.

There was an outline of a hand right next to Chuuya's that was touching the glass. It was around the same size as his, but only the palm was visible. The rest was hidden within the bluish darkness.

He immediately came to a certain realization. The glass itself wasn't black; that wasn't what was making it impossible to see inside. The vessel's glass was actually clear, and the cylinder was filled with a bluish-black liquid, obscuring the contents from view.

"Is somebody in there?!" Chuuya shouted at N. But N did not reply; he simply fixed him with a calm gaze.

"Answer me, damn it! Who's in there?!"

The hand was almost the *exact same size* as Chuuya's.

"No need to rush. I'm about to introduce you."

N took out a remote control from a pocket in his white lab coat, then turned one of the many knobs.

The sound of wastewater draining could be heard as the bluish-black liquid began to bubble. The water level slowly lowered from the top of the cylinder.

Chuuya took a step back as he stared in mute amazement. "Is that...?"

What appeared from inside the liquid...was Chuuya.

His eyes were closed. All he was wearing was a plastic lab garment. He was ghastly thin, which made him appear slightly younger than Chuuya himself. Both ankles were shackled with silvery-white chains attached to something deep within the water.

"Allow me to introduce you to the original you."

Chuuya stared in a daze.

“The owner of the self-contradicting skill. Other than his skill, he was an ordinary boy born in a hot spring district in the San’in region. This special vessel was calibrated so he wouldn’t be crushed to death by the singularity’s gravity. That’s the only reason why he’s still alive.”

The boy in the cylinder suddenly began violently coughing in agony. It looked like he was having trouble breathing. Before long, he bent completely over while vomiting so painfully that it seemed like he was going to hack up his organs. The cylinder vessel, however, muffled the sounds within.

“Hey! He’s in pain! Is he gonna be okay?!”

“Of course not,” N replied calmly. “He just lost the amniotic fluid that was keeping him alive.”

“What?!”

The boy inside writhed on the floor of the vessel while screaming something and violently hitting the glass, although Chuuya could not hear what he was saying.

“What the hell are you doing?! Save him!”

“There’s no need. He already fulfilled his role long ago—his role to bring you to life.”

The boy went into convulsions on the floor while vomiting an unbelievable amount of blood.

Chuuya’s complexion instantly changed. He grabbed N by the collar and pulled him forward. “Fill that tank with water again!” he screamed. “This instant!”

“Why?” N’s expression didn’t change.

“Do it, or I’ll kill you!”

N shrugged. “Very well. Here.”

He then held out the remote he used to drain the water, which Chuuya immediately ripped out of his hand. It had three black knobs, three black buttons, and one red button. Chuuya turned the knob—the one that had drained the water—back in place, but nothing happened. He pushed several buttons, but still nothing happened.

The boy continued to suffer. His body trembled while dark-red blood gushed from his mouth. His face turned bluish purple due to the blood in his lungs making it impossible to breathe.

Chuuya desperately pressed every button combination he could think of until he heard a *clank*, and the vessel began to tilt sideways. It then leaned forward as if it were bowing until the front half of the vessel popped open, releasing the liquid inside along with the young boy.

Chuuya lifted the boy's body off the floor. "Don't die on me!"

The boy gasped in Chuuya's arms, his chest contracting and expanding aggressively as he still struggled to breathe. His face was no different from Chuuya's, but his eyes were a little kinder and much feebler. The boy grabbed Chuuya, his gaze pleading. He opened his mouth as if to say something. His lungs filled with a puff of air.

And that was it. His life had come to an end.

His grip weakened, and his hand dropped to his side. His eyes clouded over after losing focus. The now-useless air in his lungs was expelled like a sigh, signaling the end.

Chuuya watched in a daze as the boy's body began to deteriorate. His skin peeled off as his flesh melted—until they eventually turned into a puddle of that same bluish-black liquid.

There was no way to stop it. His flesh fell to the floor, leaving only his skeleton. All that was left was the young boy's small white bones, his garment, the bundles of transfusion tubes and measurement cords still attached to him, and the bluish-black sludge at Chuuya's feet.

Chuuya laid the skeleton on the floor, then violently grabbed N.

"What is wrong with you?!"

But N didn't even blink.

"I wasn't lying when I said I was your father," N stated flatly, as if he were reading from a set of cue cards. "I designed your body. I tweaked your genes so you'd be able to withstand Arahabaki's power."

That was when the unbelievable happened. N effortlessly pulled Chuuya's hand off his clothes.

"What...?!"

Chuuya tried to punch him, but he couldn't. In fact, he couldn't even stand. His knees wobbled. His body grew heavy. N wasn't strong; Chuuya was growing weak. He'd felt this way once before.

"This is...the same as when..."

It was a year ago, at the cemetery by the cliffside. This was the same feeling as when Shirase stabbed him from behind. What was it that Shirase

said that day?

"I wouldn't squirm so much if I were you. The blade was tipped with rat poison... Your arms and legs are gonna be numb for a while, so you won't be able to move like normal."

His voice was far away yet strangely prominent. Chuuya dropped to his knees. His hands were too heavy. But why? Why now?

"I designed you. That's why I know all about you. I know how physically strong your body is, yet how you're just as weak to poison as any ordinary person."

"'Poison'...?"

Chuuya searched his memory. Poisoning him was not an easy task. He would've immediately realized it if he had been attacked.

That was when it hit him.

It happened before they entered the facility when they were told they needed to have their belongings checked and their blood tested.

The blood-drawing kit. The needle.

"The syringe from when we got here...!"

"I invited you here in order to tell you the truth because I believed we could avoid being assassinated by Verlaine that way," N casually admitted as he adjusted his shirt and smoothed out the wrinkle left by Chuuya's grip. "But that strategy had an element of uncertainty. There's no absolute proof that Verlaine would give up if we simply told you the truth. That's why we decided to take a more reliable approach."

Chuuya struggled in an attempt to stand, splashing the bluish-black sludge at his feet.

"Do you get it? If you die, Verlaine will have no reason to stay in this country."

"I'm gonna kill you!"

Chuuya exploded with rage. He leaped to his feet with a surge of emotion, no physical strength involved, and swung at N.

N calmly took out a gun and shot Chuuya. The point blank hit ricocheted off his forehead and knocked him backward until he fell to the ground. His forehead was bleeding, but the bullet hadn't reached his brain. It simply slid across his skin and continued to soar past him. He had focused every bit of his skill to redirect the bullet before it struck his head.

Showing no emotion, N continued to shoot Chuuya as he lay on the

ground. Chuuya was unable to deflect all the bullets as a few hit him in the chest and stomach, sending blood and bits of flesh into the air. He let out a voiceless scream.

“I’m sure you think I’m an awful person, but I’m not doing this merely because I don’t want to die. I’m doing this to continue our research. In other words, I’m doing this for our country.”

N took a container out of his lab coat pocket. He then opened it, revealing a syringe that he thrust into one of Chuuya’s fresh wounds.

“I am committing a fiendish act for the sake of my organization. You can sympathize, right? After all, you’re part of a large organization, too.”

“Eat...shit...,” Chuuya growled. He lifted his hand, but it never reached N. It fell to the floor.

And then there was darkness.



Shirase suddenly appeared to be in pain. He collapsed to the floor, grabbed his throat, and began writhing in agony.

“Shirase! What’s wrong?!” I asked, already running a diagnosis.

His heart rate was slowing. His blood pressure dropped. He was clammy and twitching, and he was having trouble breathing. It was a textbook example of poisoning, but the air composition was as per usual, no irregularities. I checked my logs from previous environmental scans, but there were no traces of poison gas anywhere.

I promptly gave him a shot of atropine, an anticholinergic agent, in order to alleviate the symptoms. After observing him for a while, I saw signs of improvement, so I decided to give him an even bigger dose. I had a moderate stock of drugs to combat biological and chemical weapons, since I was originally designed for use in warfare. With this drug, his life was no longer in danger.

After Shirase had settled down, I gently laid him on the floor and tried to leave the room. But I could not. The door wouldn’t open—neither the door we came from nor the door to the elevator. I could not connect to the control panel, either. I was also unable to contact anyone outside the facility since I already learned the room had electromagnetic shielding.

N had lured us into this room to trap us. That was his plan all along.

The mission's risk level suddenly increased 38 percent. This was an extremely unfavorable position to be in. After thinking for a few moments, I rammed my body into the exit, but the iron door did not even budge. I threw a metal chair at it, but that only left a slight dent.

I was in a narrow, corridor-like room with only a chair, desk, and lockers for the employees. I could have contacted someone outside if there were a device that could take a wired connection. Furthermore, the floor and ceiling were made of extremely thick iron for the electromagnetic shielding, so breaking through them to escape would prove extremely difficult.

There was no other option.

I reached for my lower back and opened the attachment port, then felt around for the correct part before pulling it out. Next, I opened up my right hand from between my index and middle fingers down to my wrist and equipped the new part in the crevice.

It was a military-grade attachable handsaw. The rotating saw was around the size of my palm. It was typically used to chase after a suspect who escaped behind a locked door.

While rotating the blade, I pressed the saw against the locking mechanism on the door leading to the direction we came. A high-pitched, harsh noise filled the air as sparks flew onto my suit. It was going to take a while, but I had to hurry. This research facility was dangerous.

The poison was probably meant for Master Chuuya while Shirase was merely collateral damage. And now we were trapped. Master Chuuya was in danger. He might have already been killed, even. Or worse...



The room was empty. There were no tables, no chairs, no monitors, no decorations—nothing. There were only notches carved into the wall for measuring height. The room was around the size of a small school pool—in fact, it was actually a tank for storing water to be used during laboratory emergencies.

Chuuya was hanging from the wall in that room. He was held up by his wrists which were tied up with thick barbed wire that pierced his skin like a

wild beast sinking its teeth into its prey. His feet barely managed to touch the floor.

His shirt had been removed, revealing the bleeding holes left by the bullets. The two deepest holes were in his chest and stomach and had large stakes stuck inside them. These stakes were connected to the ceiling with a chain that carried an electric shock through them.

Chuuya screamed. The smell of burnt flesh tickled his nose.

The electric current went through the stakes and exited through the barbed wire around his wrists. Each shock tore his muscles, nerves, and organs so excruciatingly it felt like he was being turned into mincemeat. Agony like this would make most wish they were never born.

"I'm...gonna kill you...," Chuuya groaned while he glared at the monitor hanging from the ceiling.

Another electrical shock. He growled deeply like a wild beast once more.

N was watching from the observation room. The electric current's white flashes were visible, but N didn't even blink.

"Give him ten milliliters of Midazolam," he ordered his nearby subordinate, keeping his eyes glued to the screen.

"But his heart rate...," a young researcher said while checking the measurements on a device.

"It won't kill him. Do it."

A few devices suddenly moved, and a clear liquid began flowing through one of the four white tubes inserted in Chuuya's back before disappearing into his body. His eyes opened wide and he began to groan in agony as if his innards were being twisted.

Nevertheless, N's expression still didn't change. He showed neither sympathy nor malice. His eyes seemed to only be seeing numerical values as he observed Chuuya.

There were around twenty chairs, several gauges, and a group of researchers in the observation room. Everyone was busily shuffling back and forth while comparing any situational changes against their notes to make sure nothing would get in the way of this important experiment.

"Does it hurt, Chuuya?" N asked into the microphone in front of him.

Chuuya remained hanging lifelessly without replying.

“Sorry. I wish there was another way we could do this.” N didn’t sound remotely guilty. “But this is the only way to save you,” he added while checking the experiment’s values out of the corner of his eye. “Just like how we respect your will, we respect the will of your skill, Arahabaki, as well. But...how should I put this? Your will is tying Arahabaki down, and as long as your will is firm, we won’t be able to remove Arahabaki from you. We won’t be able to remove the only singularity in this country that we can control—the one thing that reshapes what is considered common knowledge when it comes to skills.”

After that, N cut off the microphone with the switch in his hand, then asked the subordinate next to him, “How is he reacting to the Midazolam?”

“He’s showing symptoms. It will take another two minutes before we see a significant response.”

N nodded. “Give him another twenty milliliters,” he ordered before turning the microphone back on.

“Chuuya, your persona model is clutching the reins of Arahabaki and holding it back. Basically, killing you would cause us to lose a singularity we have under control. Moreover, attempting to override the current persona model—you—with another one would make the two models clash, which could cause Arahabaki to go out of control. And we’d prefer not to have another research facility blown up.”

N snorted at his own joke so quietly that no one else heard. But his smirk immediately evaporated.

“That’s why we’ve come up with this.”

He then turned a knob on his remote control, and a heavy current immediately ran down the chains and into the stakes piercing Chuuya’s wounds.

He howled in extreme agony; it felt as if his entire body were being ripped apart. He twisted and turned to escape from the pain, but the barbed wire around his wrists only dug deeper into his flesh, causing him to bleed even more.

“We’re going to make you willingly release Arahabaki. You don’t need to think too much about it, though. All you have to do is recite the control incantation. It’s the authentication code that initializes the seal. After that, we’ll be able to input your character set, and once we confirm the control

incantation, we'll delete you and override your personality with a different one. You'll finally be freed from all pain, including the pain you're experiencing now, which could go on for who knows how many days... That—and the never-ending darkness you've inhabited for years.”

Never-ending darkness. That was the first phrase Chuuya reacted to. He hadn't responded to anything said to him up until then, and yet those words made his neck twitch. That change did not go unnoticed by N, either.

“You're going to repeat the following phrase. You can say it in your head if you want. It's a simple phrase,” N told him before closing his eyes to monotonously recite the authentication code he knew by heart. It was a simple couplet.

“O grantors of dark disgrace, do not wake me again...”

“O grantors of dark disgrace...”

Chuuya's lips moved almost automatically. The drugs were taking effect, and his eyes were having trouble staying focused. They were the eyes of someone who didn't know what he was saying. The movement of his mouth and trembling of his throat were completely involuntary.

“Good,” muttered N with a faint smirk.

“Do not wake.....,” Chuuya continued. “Who...am I...?”

His words listlessly fell to the floor before spreading out and cooling the room.

N frowned in disgust at the monitor. “Increase the voltage,” he ordered, never taking his eyes off the screen.

“But...”

“Do it!”

A heavy current was subsequently sent into Chuuya's body through the stakes. An amorphous electric snake rampaged through his organs, nerves, and muscles. Chuuya howled.



My rotating saw severed the lock shaft on the door, which finally brought an end to the unpleasant sound. The saw attached to my hand had distorted due to the heat. I was not going to be able to use it again, so I decided to discard it there.

I could finally escape, but I could not abandon Shirase, who was unconscious. As an android programmed to protect humans, I did not have the option of leaving a defenseless human somewhere dangerous, regardless of the circumstances. I had to bring Shirase to a safe location before I could search for Master Chuuya.

I reached out to open the sliding door with its severed lock, but there was no need...because the door was suddenly blown away, along with me as well.

The floor was above my head, then under my feet, and then above my head once more. As I tumbled backward, I felt a strong concentration of stress in my shoulder and head. An impact had knocked me back. I had been shot.

My main priority was getting back to my feet, followed by scanning the environment with my sensor. It picked up three enemies—heavily armed soldiers. That was no surprise, considering that this was a military facility. They must have blown the door up with an explosive before rushing inside.

I analyzed where I was shot and discovered a spiral fissure in my exodermal armor. This was not good. I had been hit with a full metal jacket bullet.

Softer bullets are typically used in battles against other humans because they get lodged in their bodies and cause greater damage. However, seeing as these bullets prioritized speed and penetrating power, the enemy must have come prepared to go into battle with an inorganic target like me. This was extremely unfavorable.

My vision stabilized, which allowed me to see the door, but the three soldiers were already aiming their weapons at me. A storm of bullets was coming my way with such high precision that it would not be possible to evade.



A heart was beating. It was painfully loud, as if someone was pounding a large drum right next to his ear. Chuuya Nakahara looked in the direction of the noise, but of course, there was no heart there.

Whose heartbeat is it, then? Mine? That's absurd. I'm not even human.

Something as sophisticated as a heart wouldn't suit me.

Another electric current sent Chuuya's body into convulsions whether he resisted or not. It felt as if each blood vessel were being chopped into thousands of pieces and his body fluids were being boiled until nothing remained. This was far beyond the kind of pain a sixteen-year-old boy like him could endure. The only silver lining was that nobody cared how much he screamed or wailed. That was why Chuuya yelled every time he felt pain; he could taste the blood in his throat.

He hadn't heard from N for some time. Researchers despised unproductive labor. He must have wanted to let Chuuya suffer alone in silence for a while.

Chuuya's skill hadn't completely disappeared, but it was extremely weak. They must have been constantly pumping poison into his body through the tubes in his back. His limbs were numb, and his head was in a daze. He could no longer tell what he was physically doing in reality versus what was just in his head. And he was being injected with other drugs as well. Some sort of truth serum or hallucinogen.

Who knew how much longer he could take it?

Obviously, I'm gonna never gonna give in. I can keep this up forever.

But for what purpose?

"I told you, Chuuya."

He looked up in the direction of the sudden voice. It was a familiar voice, one that belonged to the person he hated most in this world.

"Your birth itself was a mistake. We're the same. Is there really a point to suffering through all that pain for a life that isn't even real?"

The voice was taunting him.

"Shut up," Chuuya spat, but even he knew he was talking to himself. He was most likely hearing things due to the drugs he was given. There was nobody there, but his mind was scattered, and the voice wouldn't stop.

"Screw you, Dazai."

"That's the best comeback you could come up with?"

Chuuya wanted nothing more than to slice off the ear the voice was whispering into. He could see Dazai's wavering shadow by his side, and he wanted to gouge out his eyes.

"That's just proof that you at least somewhat believe what I'm saying. Because deep down inside, you're the same as me."

“Shut up, shut up, shut up! I’m me! I’m not some piece of shit like you!”

“I figured you’d say that to him.”

Another voice, this one deeper than the last, suddenly grabbed Chuuya’s heart, freezing it over.

“But you can’t keep lying to yourself forever. Didn’t I tell you that when I welcomed you into our group?”

Chuuya looked at the individual. This was what convinced him that he was hallucinating because of the drugs.

“Piano Man...”

Chuuya’s voice was hoarse. A drop of sweat ran down his chin and fell to the floor.

Piano Man was leaning against the opposite wall with his arms crossed, languidly looking this way. It was just like how he always stood against the wall at the pool hall. Chuuya couldn’t possibly forget.

“I told you why I let you into the group, right? It was because I was worried you might start a rebellion against the organization. You looked like you wanted to destroy everything in your path, burn it all to the ground in revenge. Still do.”

Shadows began to walk through the wall past the worried Piano Man’s side: Albatross, Iceman, Lippmann, and Doc. They smiled and spoke to Chuuya as well.

“We all died ’cause of how unique you are. But we don’t hate ya for it,” said Albatross.

“We were all members of the Mafia. We knew we could die at any moment,” said Lippmann.

“Don’t be stupid! I...!”

Their smiles faded, and the next voice whispered right into Chuuya’s ear.

“So just die already.”

When Chuuya immediately turned around, alarmed, he saw Shirase’s ghastly pale face staring back at him.

“Atone for what you’ve done to your friends in the Mafia and us Sheep. Pay for it with your life.”

That was when Chuuya realized the kids from the Sheep—his old friends—were all gathered around him.

Betrayal and separation.

Dozens of children coldly glared at Chuuya.

"Chuuya, you always said you were simply fulfilling the duty of those with power. Was that a lie?"

"I thought you said you'd protect us. Did you forget how we fed you when you were on the verge of starvation? How we protected you?"

Stop.

Chuuya twisted his body and tried to cover his ears, but his arms were still chained to the ceiling.

"Hmph. You're the king? Yeah, right. All you did was ruin our lives."

"Chuuya, you—"

"Shut up! If you think you can become king, then do it! You can have this power!" Chuuya howled, unable to take it any longer. "To hell with power! If I didn't have this skill, I'd still be with you guys...!"

Another electric shock. A blinding white light flashed in Chuuya's mind, and deep within the light, he saw the impossible.

The Sheep never disbanded. They were still a group just like they always had been. Chuuya wasn't anyone special; he didn't have a skill, either. He was just a regular member of the group. He wasn't the king, he had no powers, he wasn't the center of attention—he was simply a single Sheep among the flock, chatting with his friends.

"I..."

The illusion disappeared, leaving only Chuuya and his wounded body. And then there was silence.

The next hallucination Chuuya saw was someone's fingertips.

"Your colleagues and friends all left you. Why do you think that is, my dear brother?"

Chuuya sluggishly lifted his head. He had a good idea of who it was.

"You now, huh...?"

"Yes, me. Of course it's me. I was created in a lab just like you. I'm the perfect person to answer your questions," the illusion said as he adjusted his black porkpie hat.

"My questions...eh?" Chuuya repeated. "Then tell me this. What did I do wrong? When did I mess things up?"

The hallucination—Verlaine—appeared a touch sad.

"At the very beginning." His eyes were crystal clear with no lie hidden behind them. "After all, your birth itself was a mistake, just like mine."

Being born was a mistake.

Chuuya's fists were trembling.

Is that really okay? Can I just let them get away with it?

"No, they can't simply get away with it. Of course not. It is time for judgment to begin. They need to be punished."

"Punished..."

"I'm proud of you for fighting through the pain." There was even kindness in Verlaine's voice. "You took responsibility for being powerful. Now it's time for them to take responsibility for what they did. Make them pay. Only then will it all finally balance out."

"Ha-ha... Wish I could." Chuuya's hollow laughter was directed at himself. "I wanna tear 'em to pieces, but that's not possible. I can't get out of here. I'm gonna die in pain and despair."

"I won't let you die."

Verlaine approached Chuuya, then pulled a stake out of him. Chuuya's eyes flew open. After Verlaine removed all the electrodes, he crushed them with gravity. He ripped the barbed wire off Chuuya's wrists while pulling out all the tubes in his spine as well.

"I'm going to kill that researcher," Verlaine said after removing all the restraints, checking Chuuya's wounds, and getting to his feet. "Just like I originally planned. You're free to just sit here. But if you want to make the man who ruined your life take responsibility, then..."

Verlaine extended a hand to Chuuya.

"Come with me."

Chuuya quietly stared at the hand as if he were observing something bizarre.

"Why...?"

"I told you when we first met. I came here to save you."

Verlaine smiled. It didn't look like the smile of a spy or an assassin. It was the smile of a young man.

"Be angry, Chuuya. Be mad at the unfair hand you were dealt. Be enraged at the researchers who played with your life. That rage will help you take it back. Reclaim your life, Chuuya. It belongs to you. That is, unless you want to spend the rest of it as a guinea pig with a serial number."

Of course I don't.

The rage got Chuuya's blood flowing, which heated his muscles. He

stood and took Verlaine's hand with a viselike grip.

"Let's go, dear brother." Verlaine smiled as he held Chuuya upright. "Let's kill N and get your soul back from this irrational world."



The incoming storm of bullets was about to land when I released the impact-resistant shield in my forearm. The umbrella-shaped shield's surface was coated with a superalloy that was both heat and impact resistant and could defend from most lightweight attacks. It was specially created to withstand the high energy of Arahabaki.

The full metal jacket bullets slid off the shield's surface and soared past me. Three of those shots stopped upon impact. The kinetic energy caused the alloy to peel off the surface, but the damage was minimal.

I leaped into the air with my shield still raised, then kicked off a soldier's rifle and jumped once more. After landing on the wall behind them, I kicked off it and charged right into one of the soldier's backs. My sensor picked up the light impact cracking his ribs. One man down.

Still atop the soldier, I swung one long leg like a scythe to sweep another soldier's legs. When he fell to the ground, I pricked his neck with the needle in my finger and injected him with a drug. Two men down.

However, the third soldier had plenty of time to face me and fire his gun while I was handling the other two, and that was what he was about to do. My hands were on the floor, so I could not release the shield on my forearm fast enough. I rapidly searched for a solution, but nothing I found would make it in time.

I ended up not needing a solution, though.

The soldier's body was knocked into the air. I heard a burst of electricity, and he then immediately went into convulsions, dropping his gun. Only a few seconds of pained groaning went by before he lost all strength and collapsed.

I hadn't done a thing.

A savior had appeared from the corridor behind the soldiers. It was a very unexpected individual.

"Well, that was boring," the individual said, yawning as he lowered the

Taser in his hand. "You kill a guy with electricity, and he just dies. What a snore."

"You're with the Port Mafia..."

It was Osamu Dazai.

"Nice to meet you, detective. Where's Chuuya?" Dazai asked upon tossing the Taser to the floor indifferently. He looked to be around the same age as Master Chuuya.

"Master Chuuya has been..."

"Seeing how much time has gone by, I'm guessing he's been captured? Or did you already save him?" He stepped onto and over the unconscious soldier as he approached me. "Because I'd hate to miss out on seeing a crying Chuuya get tortured."

"'Tortured'? Master Chuuya?"

Was he really being tortured? It was possible, but how would this boy know that? Why was he even here?

I recalled Dazai could nullify other skills and was going to be our secret weapon against Verlaine, but he never answered his phone, no matter how many times we contacted him. So why was he here now?

"You're going to ask me why I'm here, and I'm going to reply, 'This was all part of the plan.' Then you're going to ask me, 'What is the plan?' And I'm going to tell you, 'Everything. From the very beginning. It was all part of my master plan.' After that, you're going to say, 'What do you mean?'"

I tried to analyze the information with my processor as high priority in order to comprehend what Dazai was saying, but his mind was quicker. It took everything I had to keep up.

"Then I'll tell you, 'Everything means exactly how it sounds. Everything. Verlaine's targets, the detective, the researcher—it was all based on the information I gave Verlaine. In other words, the system he used to assassinate people was my system, too. Next, you're gonna ask me, 'Why would you do that?'"

He was right. That was indeed the question on my mind. What he had just said highly suggested he was working with Verlaine. It was possible that Dazai was calling the shots behind the detective's death and the danger Master Chuuya was currently in. In other words, this was a betrayal. Another battle could be inevitable depending on what he said next.

However, Dazai's eventual reply went far beyond anything I imagined.

"I did it to *buy time* before Verlaine reached his biggest target. His final target is Ougai Mori, the Port Mafia boss. Normally, he would've been the first to be assassinated, but after manipulating the intel a bit, I got him placed last in line. And thanks to the time I bought, I'm ready to assassinate Verlaine instead. Just need to make a few final touches to the plan first."

Dazai then smiled and helped me stand up. After that, he stared into nothingness like some sage who saw all.

"Chuuya's gonna kill N at this rate and lose his humanity, but I want to see him suffer as a human. That's why I have to stop him."



Alarms blared as if the apocalypse had arrived. Red emergency lights flashed, instantly transforming the facility into the belly of the beast. All wireless feeds for general staff were activated, and every line repeated a warning over the radio:

"Intruder detected within the facility. All intelligence officers present are to destroy specified documents, then leave the facility immediately. Ops Division members are to be armed and waiting in position. This is not a drill. I repeat. This is not a drill."

I specifically blocked out the aggravating alarm from my hearing and continued my preparations. After putting the unconscious Shirase inside the storage room, I closed the door and electrically locked it.

"I switched the lock with an encryption key that changes after a certain amount of time. Shirase should be safe for the time being."

"Good work. Looks like that just leaves Chuuya," Dazai said as he began walking off, wholly uninterested in Shirase.

"Dazai, wait," I pleaded. "You said 'as a human' when referring to Master Chuuya earlier. Do you know whether he is human?"

I was curiously hopeful that he would know the truth. I did not have any evidence to back it up. It was simply how I felt. It was the hubris of man to believe that machines did not have gut feelings or flashes of inspiration. Anything a human could do, a machine could do as well, of course.

"No clue," he quickly replied, but his eyes faintly narrowed as if he was

deeply speculating something. “Both N and Verlaine claim Chuuya’s not human, but I think they could be wrong. At least that’s how I feel after reading this notebook—Rimbaud’s memoirs. In a way, this whole thing started because of what was written in here,” revealed Dazai as he took an old, leather-bound notebook out of his pocket.

Rimbaud’s journal!

I immediately scanned the notebook in Dazai’s hand. Was it real? It was possible. The late spy’s notebook was a sort of diary that he wrote in secret before each mission. It was a book of national secrets in a way, since it contained information regarding his wartime missions. There were rumors of its existence, but nothing about it ever being found.

“Where did you get that?”

“You can try to get me to tell you, but you’d just be wasting your time. All I do is lie. I’m a huge pathological liar.” Dazai’s lips curled into a cryptic smile.

I used my built-in lie detector, but it failed to pick up anything. His vitals were hardly any different from a sleeping human’s. If anything, his level of output was strangely average despite the circumstances. Just who was this boy?

“Looks like we don’t have time to chat over some tea right now. We’ve gotta find Chuuya,” Dazai said drowsily while scratching the back of his neck.

“How do we even start, though?”

“With Chuuya, it’s simple, really.”

He smirked knowingly, as if he had all the answers.

“We just need to go to the noisiest place here.”



An explosion roared as the wall burst into pieces.

Chuuya rushed through the rubble and dust cloud like a cannonball, and the air-splitting shock wave dispersed the dust a few moments later. Standing before him was a group of armed facility guards prepping for battle.

“I want Shock Squad Pomegranate at the east corridor! Engineer Squad

Bracken, go blow up the west corridor and seal it off! Buy as much time as you can so the intelligence officers can escape! Now, get mov—”

But the commander never finished that sentence. Chuuya’s knee had bent the man in half before sending him flying back.

Eight seasoned soldiers, carefully selected to protect a top secret military facility, immediately got into position with their guns in unison. It would be insulting to compare their skill level with the average enlisted soldiers who were hired to guard rations or equipment. Only those with the highest level of marksmanship, stamina, focus, and battle prowess were allowed to work here.

However, they were only skilled when it came to battling other ordinary humans. Never once did they imagine they’d have to fight a human-size beast that was flying toward them with the speed of the wind and the weight of a truck.

“Don’t let him through! The panic room’s just up ahead! We have to buy time until the top intelligence officers finish evacuating!”

Chuuya, low in the air, rammed his body into one of the soldiers who was about to shoot, which sent the soldier flying like a leaf in a storm. Chuuya then kicked the soldier in the stomach, knocking him into another soldier on the opposite side of the room. It was as if a violent gale had passed through the narrow chamber; the soldiers bounced off the walls like billiard balls.

A mere dozen or so seconds went by until only silence and death reigned. Chuuya stepped over the guards’ bodies on the floor as if they meant nothing, then placed a hand on the door to the panic room.

It didn’t open. The door felt heavy and had an electric lock.

Chuuya used pressurized gravity on the door in an attempt to break the lock, but it still didn’t open. The poison had weakened his skill.

“Focus.”

Before Chuuya even realized, Verlaine was leaning against the wall by the door with his arms crossed.

“You’ve been poisoned. So what? You’re the beast who will end this world. Make that skill yours. Because that’s what you’ll have to do if you really wish to destroy the evil behind this door.”

“I know that...!”

Chuuya placed both hands on the door and clenched his jaw. His skill’s

output gradually grew stronger.

The door—which was resistant to explosives, chemicals, and skills—was built to withstand intruders' attacks. Most skill users wouldn't be able to destroy it, let alone even make it creak.

"Focus. Tame the beast with your will. You will die if you don't."

The air distorted. Chuuya's clothes began billowing as his skill's glow concentrated around his fists.



Where am I?

That was the first thought Shirase had when he woke up. He was inside a weapons locker. He could barely touch the walls with his arms and legs if he stretched, but there was hardly any light. Shirase couldn't even see his own nose.

"Chuuya? Adam?"

He called out to them, but nobody replied. He didn't sense anyone's presence, either.

That is, until he noticed the emergency alarm going off outside the locker along with rushing footsteps and panicked voices. He heard some people mention an intruder while others were talking about non-researchers evacuating. The facility was clearly in some sort of trouble.

Research facility. Oh yeah.

He had finally remembered what was going on.

Shirase sat up. He'd been invited into the facility and descended deep underground until all of a sudden, it was painful to even breathe, and he passed out. Gunfire could be heard in the distance. He was all alone trapped in this cramped space.

They left me here. They abandoned me.

"Damn it! Chuuya! Where'd you go?! Get me outta here!"

He kicked the door with brute strength, and it easily opened. Shirase was instantly taken aback, as he did not expect it to open, so he closed the door. He then slightly opened it again to see what was happening outside the locker and discovered numerous lockers, just like his, in what appeared to be a dark supply room. It looked like he was the only one there.

Shirase rolled out of the locker then tried to stand, but he was immediately hit by a dizzy spell that brought him to his knees. He suddenly realized he couldn't breathe, and his heart started to hurt. Most likely poison.

Damn it. They thought I was a deadweight after I got poisoned, so they stuffed me in this room and escaped without me.

Shirase closed his fist, then opened it. He was awake and alert. He wouldn't have a problem moving like this, which to him meant there was no reason for him to sit around here any longer.

Fortunately, there were a few white lab coats hanging on the wall for the researchers. He stood up and put one on because he remembered the voice on the intercom ordering all noncombatants to evacuate immediately.

I should be able to escape pretty easily if I pretend I'm one of the researchers. But Chuuya wouldn't be so lucky. All the guards are keeping an eye out for him. No way he'd be able to blend in and escape. He's probably in danger right now.

But who cares? It's not my job to save him. It's not...my job...



“Destroy all documents! Cut off the power to all areas except for Evac Route 8 and buy some time!” N shouted from inside one of the facility's few panic rooms.

This long, narrow chamber shaped like a rail carriage was supplied with a communications terminal, food, a generator, bulletproof vests, and every other essential for emergencies. There was even a single-passenger elevator in the back of the room for evacuating.

N was yelling orders for each department into the terminal while simultaneously attaching a bundle of chains to a power source and carrying it toward the entrance.

“Notify the Operations Division in the control room to drag the battle out as long as possible! Then contact the general—”

The door blew clean off its hinges, nearly grazing N's nose before piercing the wall.

“What kind of father tries to run away from his own son? Heh.”

Chuuya was standing at the entrance, glaring at N as his entire body was steaming with rage.

“Eek...!”

After the chains slipped out of N’s hand, he retreated a few steps until his back was rubbing against the wall.

“What were you doing in here? Gettin’ ready to die?”

“W-wait! I didn’t have a choice! Everything I did, I did because it’s my job! I never personally wanted to make you suffer!”

“Uh-huh. I feel bad for ya, then.”

Chuuya strode menacingly toward N, who retreated at the same pace on trembling legs. Verlaine was smiling at the entrance with his arms crossed, enjoying the show.

Chains were lying by Chuuya’s feet. N seemed to be using them for something, so Chuuya picked them up and checked their tips.

The ends of the chains had metal stakes with thick wire that ran all the way down the chains and looped through the holes. These were the electric shock devices that had been used to torture Chuuya.

“So these are what you jabbed in my stomach earlier. Now I get it... Setting up a trap to ambush me, so you could stab me one last time, eh?”

“I—I...”

Chuuya reeled in the two chains connected to a power source in two corners of the room.

“I’m gonna be honest. It hurt pretty bad. Still a valuable experience, though. I was thinking I could have you experience a hundredth of what I did,” said Chuuya while staring at the chains. But N used that brief moment to take off, running toward the door to the elevator in the back of the room until the tip of a chain pierced the hem of his coat.

“Not so fast,” Chuuya hissed with rage.

The tip of the chain went through N’s coat and pierced the wall behind him. Chuuya was already spinning the second chain, the tip almost touching the floor, as he slowly aimed at his next target. There was no way for N to run, let alone dodge the next attack, with his clothes pinned to the wall.

“Wait! You’re making a grave mistake!”

“Don’t listen to him, Chuuya,” Verlaine said over by the entrance. He checked his fingers in a bored manner. “People like him will lie about anything to survive. It was the same with me. The exact same.”

Chuuya's eyes sharply narrowed as they glowed with transparent, ruby-red bloodlust.

"W-wait! I was only doing it because it's my job! Really! That's all this was!"

"Yeah, it *was* your job," Chuuya spat as he got even closer to him. "You toyed with my soul because it's your job. You locked the other me away and killed him because it's your job. You'd do anything for your job because you're a piece of shit. So now's it's time for you to die for your job."

Gravity lifted the metal stake on the chain into the air.



Dazai and I were quickly traveling down the corridor.

"There's no proof that Chuuya is human, but there's no proof he's not human, either," Dazai told me. "All Verlaine did was steal Chuuya from that facility. That means he's an outsider in this regard. It's not like he saw Chuuya's creation as an artificial skill with his own two eyes. That N guy could be lying, too."

N could be lying?

"What would be his reason for lying?"

"Beats me. But the best liars even lie about why they lie to cover it up, and that guy smells like a first-rate liar to me. Am I wrong?"

Dazai smirked with chilling ecstasy.

However, he had a point. I scanned the vitals of every human I encountered since entering the research facility. I checked infrared intensity, heart rate, the levels of carbon dioxide exhaled, pupils, and the amount of sweat produced. Naturally, I did the same for N. Nevertheless, I did not discover any clear signs that he was going to betray us.

Master Chuuya might be a man-made creation. Or he could be human. It could go either way.

I leaned forward and increased my speed by 40 percent. If there was a 50 percent chance he was human, then I could not let him kill N. There would be no turning back if he did that.



The metal stake floated in the air, jerking the chain like a mad dog about to lunge forward.

“It’ll all be over soon.”

Chuuya was holding the chain back while it tugged in the opposite direction as if this were a game of tug-of-war. Loosening his grip only a little would send the chain flying forward like a rocket. The sharp tip of the metal stake was pointing right at N, who couldn’t move because another stake had already stapled his clothing to the wall.

“Do it, Chuuya,” urged Verlaine, crossing his arms. He sounded giddy, almost ready to start whistling a little tune. “With that much gravity, you’re not going to simply pierce his body. It’s going to blow him apart. He’ll die instantly. Isn’t that right, N?”

“Chuuya, wait! You’re going to regret this tomorrow! I guarantee it!”

“I don’t give a shit about tomorrow.” Chuuya’s eyes narrowed with ferocity. “I’ve always done what I’ve wanted. I protected those I wanted to protect and knocked down anyone who got in my way. This is no different.”

“Wait! You can’t!”



“There it is! The panic room!” shouted Dazai the moment he turned the corner. When I followed his gaze, I saw a door at the end of the hall with a few guards collapsed by its side.

“Pardon me—I’m going on ahead!”

I leaped past Dazai and straight over the pile of fallen guards before landing in front of the door. After promptly touching the door’s port, I searched for the code to unlock it. It took me 1.22 seconds to find the correct number and unlock the door.

“Master Chuuya! You must not kill him!”

I rushed into the panic room, unable to wait for the aggravatingly slow automatic door to fully open. My eyes widened in shock.

The room was empty.

Not only was it empty, but there were no signs that anyone had been

there, either. When I scanned the floor, I discovered a faint buildup of dust but no footprints. It was as if the room had not been used in years.

This was not the right location. Master Chuuya was in a different panic room.

And there was no way we were going to make it in time now.



“I don’t give a shit about tomorrow.” Chuuya’s eyes narrowed with ferocity. “I’ve always done what I’ve wanted. I protected those I wanted to protect and knocked down anyone who got in my way. This is no different.”

The chain was swelling with tension like an arrow pulled taut. And then it was loosed like one.

“Wait! You can’t!” screamed N with his hands in the air. There was nothing else he could do.

Chuuya released the chain with enough power to easily run straight through an entire building.

A roar shook the room. It was emitted by the shock wave from the chain breaking the sound barrier. The speeding metal bundle soared through the air before piercing its target without even a second of hesitation. The enemy’s chest was impaled with perfect precision.

Verlaine’s chest.

“Gwah...?”

Blood spurted out of the wound.

Verlaine froze. He had slowed down the attack by manipulating its gravity, yet the stake still dug its way deep into his torso.

Chuuya had twisted his upper body and was facing Verlaine. He’d turned around the moment he released the chain, dramatically changing its trajectory.

“Don’t act like you’re the good guy here, Verlaine. Yeah, this researcher’s a piece of shit, but you’re the one who killed my friends.” Chuuya smacked himself in the chest. “I can feel their lives burning right here inside me, and till those flames die down, I can’t just do whatever I want. I’m gonna do what I need to do. That’s who I am.”

“Chuuya...!”

Verlaine grabbed the metal stake and tried to pull it out of his chest. But before he could, Chuuya sprinted to the back of the room and pulled the lever connected to the chain. The peak output current snaked through the glittering chain like a dragon before crashing into Verlaine.

“Gaaaaaaah?!”

Electricity coursed through his body. Even Verlaine, who was strong against physical strikes and bullets, was no match for electric shocks—just like Chuuya.

“What you ‘need to do’?” Verlaine’s flesh blistered; he grabbed the chain while he went into convulsions. “Why don’t you get it? There *isn’t* anything you need to do! Live how you want to live! Destroy what you want to destroy! Because there’s only one thing we needed to do, and that was to not be born!”

Verlaine’s trembling fingers tightened around the chain as he slowly pulled it out.

“Just shut up.” Chuuya’s eyes burned with fierce determination. “Maybe that’s what you wanna do, but don’t shove your beliefs down my throat. ‘Cause that ain’t how I feel at all.”

Several shadows ran through the light in his eyes:

His friends in the Sheep.

His friends in the Port Mafia.

The light in his eyes was determination. It was the powerful brilliance of humankind, something gained only through encounters and partings with other people.

“You’ve been completely wrong from the very start,” Chuuya spat in disgust. “‘Being born was a mistake’? Sounds like the kind of garbage Dazai would spew, and no way in hell am I ever gonna think the way he does!”

Verlaine pulled out the chain, then tossed it to the ground. But Chuuya simultaneously charged at him.

“Chuuyaaaaa!”

“Verlaaaaaaine!”





Verlaine threw a punch while Chuuya threw one of his own just as quickly. As their fists collided, a flash of black light exploded, filling the room.



“The facility’s automatic disposal system is in progress. Sixty-eight percent of the facilities are now dysfunctional. We have to find Master Chuuya before the rest of the operations are shut down.”

I set the room’s communications device to a preferred connection and tried to hack into the facility’s main system. There was only one thing left we could do after losing sight of Master Chuuya. I had to hack into the security system through the computer in the panic room and pinpoint where a battle was taking place.

The panic room had an established connection to the facility’s security system in order for the evacuated VIP to give orders from inside. However, being a secret military connection, the line was highly secure. Furthermore, the facility’s functions were gradually shutting down, so the rooms’ ports were rapidly disconnecting from the central hub. It was like wanting to cross a wooden suspension bridge, but the planks were gradually falling off.

“You should probably check the fuel supply system first,” suggested Dazai while spinning in a swivel chair with his hands behind his head. “All the documents in here, plus the facility itself, are gonna be burned so that there’s no evidence left. Only after the workers get out, though. That’s why the fuel supply system needs to stay put until the end, so you should still be able to hack into it.”

“Very well.”

The fuel supply system was comparatively easier to hack than the others (the life-support, security, and main memory systems). After that, I was able to send commands to other facilities through the processor I was operating, thus expanding the scope of my control.

“I wonder if we can do it,” I said as I struggled with the system.

“Do what?”

“Defeat Verlaine. Even if we do find Master Chuuya, we still have to defeat Verlaine. Will we really be able to defeat him?”

“Beats me,” replied Dazai almost indifferently. “Of course, I’ll try to come up with a way to take him down, but it doesn’t really matter if we lose. We’ll just die. There’s only one thing I can say for sure about Verlaine.”

Dazai lowered his arms and looked at me, his eyes even colder and more robotic than a machine’s.

“There isn’t a single human in this world who can defeat Verlaine in hand-to-hand combat alone.”



A storm shook the small room. Two fists clashed, producing miniature suns that disappeared almost instantly. The collision of two forces of gravity tightly compressed the space before it returned to normal. The shock wave alone ravaged the room, knocking over tables and sending electronic devices smashing into the wall.

“Is that all you’ve got, Chuuya?!” shouted Verlaine.

The plaster cracked like a piece of candy and crumbled onto the floor, simply from being in close proximity to Verlaine’s punch.

Chuuya continued to dodge the flurry of meteorite-like strikes. A single one would be enough to kill him. Right as he threw a low kick, Verlaine increased the gravity of his guard, but Chuuya suddenly switched to a middle kick.

Verlaine groaned when Chuuya’s leg struck his torso. However, Chuuya was the one who turned pale.

Verlaine had grabbed Chuuya’s face. Before Chuuya could even counter, Verlaine swiftly lifted him up and slammed him into the wall, leaving a radial crack upon impact.

Chuuya screamed in agony, but still reached out for Verlaine’s wrist to pull off his hand, though all he grabbed was air. Verlaine’s arm was no longer there; by the time Chuuya realized this, Verlaine had buried a front kick deep in his torso.

Chuuya slammed into the wall as if he had been hit by a semitruck, demolishing it and coughing up blood. The attack left him badly wounded since he was unable to leap back and weaken the impact.

He shot through the demolished wall and into another room, then crashed through two more walls as well. Chuuya was covered in dust and rubble; he couldn't even see Verlaine anymore.

Verlaine lowered his leg, then checked his injuries. Blood was pouring out of the wound in his chest, soiling his suit. It was deep.

"Why don't you get it, Chuuya?" Verlaine scowled at the blood staining his hand. "There's no reason for us to fight."

His eyes then locked onto an iron slab on the floor. It was the gray top of a broken desk. Verlaine placed his toes under it, tossed it into the air, and kicked it. The slab pierced the wall right in front of N as he tried to escape.

"Eek!"

"Did you really think I'd let you get away?"

After grabbing N by the neck, Verlaine effortlessly lifted him up and pressed him against the wall.

"You have zero chance of getting out of here alive." His eyes shone with a light that hadn't been there before: Rage. "I can see something sinister inside you. A darkness far deeper than any evil."

N tensely smirked and replied hoarsely, "Is that really something...an assassin should be saying?"

"Sometimes creating is far more sinister than killing."

Verlaine's grip tightened around N's neck. The gravity being emitted from his hand warped the space around it.

"W-wait...! Just listen to what I have to say!"

"No," replied Verlaine as his fingers tightened.

However, right before the supergravity could snap N's neck clean off his shoulders, he screamed:

"If I die, your secrets die with me!"

Verlaine stopped squeezing.

Time passed: one second, then two. Nobody said a word. Nobody moved. Nobody even blinked.

"...What?" muttered Verlaine in a deep, slightly cracked voice after five silent seconds went by.

"I'm not lying. You'll lose everything, even what you want to know most of all: The Secret of the Gentle Forest."

Next came the sound of a brief intake of air. It was Verlaine.

"You...!"

A fist roared. It was Verlaine's free hand hitting the wall and causing the room to shake. He had punched right by N's face, leaving cobweb-shaped cracks as rubble fell to the ground.

"You'd better be careful if you're trying to outsmart me." Verlaine's voice was so low that it sounded as if it were coming from the pits of hell. "If I even get the feeling that you're lying, I will peel every bone off your body while you're still alive."



I finished hacking into eighteen out of twenty ports and took control of the facility's second and third computing cores. I then used their computing powers to attack the fourth and fifth cores. Everything was going smoothly. I would likely be able to obtain the necessary security systems to search for Master Chuuya at this rate.

However, the real issue would come afterward.

"Not a single human in this world can defeat Verlaine in hand-to-hand combat..." I ruminated over what Dazai said. "Does that mean there is no way to defeat him?" I asked.

When I looked over at Dazai, he replied, "Exactly." His gaze appeared all-knowing. "I was buying time to figure that out."

He then took a notebook out of his breast pocket. It was the leather-bound notebook from earlier—Rimbaud's memoirs.

"Not only can he manipulate gravity with his skill, but he has experience as a spy as well. It's insanely unfair how powerful he is. He essentially doesn't have any weaknesses. But...there is something he fears."

"Something he fears'?"

"Himself." Dazai smiled cryptically. "Just like how Arahabaki is for Chuuya, Verlaine contains a singularity that's beyond his control. And if it does lose control, it'll destroy everything in sight, including him. It'd be the nightmare of Suribachi City all over again."

The nightmare of Suribachi City.

I searched my database. Dazai was most likely referring to the explosion that happened nine years ago when Master Chuuya lost control of Arahabaki. The blast created a mile-diameter crater and left no trace of the

city that was once there. That was the true power of a singularity. It was the manifestation of something that should not exist in this world.

And slumbering inside Verlaine was a beast capable of such a catastrophe...



“‘The Secret of the Gentle Forest.’” Verlaine’s voice contained a hoarse, dry anger. “How do you know about that?”

“Artificial skill user, Paul Verlaine,” N began gently, trying to avoid the question. “The darkness sleeping inside you—that’s the other Arahabaki. Unlike the Arahabaki created in the lab, the demon within you was created by a single skill user. And you killed them. With your own two hands. That’s why you lost the chance of ever knowing about the beast that sleeps inside you. You fear its manifestation.”

“And?” replied Verlaine, clearly irritated. “Are you saying you know what this thing inside me is?”

“That’s a good question. If anything, I’m the only one who’d know the answer.”

While speaking, N slowly moved his arm behind Verlaine’s arm in his blind spot. He moved as carefully as a snail while bringing his fingers closer to his pocket.

“We were able to create Arahabaki because the military secret service managed to obtain data on you from one of their connections in German intelligence. I got chills when I read the files. The man who created you was a demon. No decent human being could come up with a thing like that.”

N’s fingers grabbed onto a remote in his pocket. It was the same remote that he handed Chuuya in front of the black cylindrical tank.

“About the only evil I can do is this.”

He pressed a button, and the ceiling collapsed. Rubble rained down onto Verlaine—along with something else.

Bluish-black liquid.

Verlaine promptly raised his hands into the air and used gravity to protect himself, but something slipped between the rubble and liquid.

That something kicked Verlaine backward.

He was instantly sent slamming into the wall. Both agony and surprise simultaneously colored his expression; not a single person was capable of penetrating his gravity-manipulating guard like this.

“Did you really think those chains and a little electricity was the ace I was keeping up my sleeve?”

N smiled. The one who kicked Verlaine landed by his side.

At N’s side was a set of bleached-white bones.

Hanging from its body were bundles of infusion tubes and cords used to measure vitals. All it wore was a plastic lab garment.

It was the skeleton of the boy who died in Chuuya’s arms before the flesh melted off his bones. The original Chuuya.

Verlaine’s face darkened with rage the instant he realized who it was. “You...!”

“We aren’t copying what they did in Europe. This is our own unique technology. It destroys what I order it to. Have a look.”

The skeleton leaped forward, the wind whistling in its wake. It sped up using gravity instead of muscle power to collide into Verlaine.

Verlaine grabbed its shoulders and stopped it, but he wasn’t able to completely halt the momentum. His heels dug into the floorboards.

Verlaine’s and the skeleton’s gravity counteracted each other, which produced a small vortex of gravity in the center of the room. The skeleton opened its jaw and tried to bite Verlaine with a click of its fleshless mandible.

“Are you in pain?” Verlaine’s eyes narrowed. His voice faintly trembled with emotion. “I’m sorry...but you should no longer be in this world.”

Verlaine increased his skill’s output. The skeleton fell to its knees with an audible *creak* and was pinned to the floor.

“I’ll take you back to the surface with me later and find you a place to sleep where you can see the stars. But for now, I need you to stay still and wait.”

He reversed gravity, causing the skeleton to float in the air. The nearby rubble floated as well.

Verlaine let go.

The condensed gravitational field then began surging in search of an exit. Verlaine purposely limited the direction it could go, which sent the skeleton accelerating that way like a cannonball.

Even after hitting the wall, it didn't stop. It shot through the wall and continued tumbling until it was covered in rubble and steel beams. Then it crashed through the walls and ceiling before piercing the wall in the very back, where it finally stopped.

Verlaine stood stock-still, gazing in the direction he sent the skeleton flying. His eyes clouded with countless emotions.

He clenched his teeth and punched the closest table with brute strength alone. The already beat-up and warped table bent even more until it was folded almost straight down the middle.

Verlaine looked around the room, but N was nowhere to be found. He had already escaped using the emergency elevator. After walking over to the back of the room, Verlaine forced the door to the elevator open, but the cab was already gone. N was taking it up to the surface.

Verlaine emotionlessly grabbed the cable dangling in front of him and pulled. The snapping of metal immediately followed as the shaft's beams broke, and soon he heard the safety mechanism breaking. Verlaine caught the falling elevator cab with one hand, pried it open, and dragged N out.

"I'm going to kill you."

There were no flames of rage in his eyes—only hatred black as boiled sludge.

"However, I'm not going to kill you with the respect I give others as an assassin. I'm going to do something different—something I've never done before. You will die by my hand in agony, regret, and despair. But first, I'll give you plenty of time to suffer for what you've done."



There was an intense pain in his side. His nerves were throbbing. He tried to sit up, but he felt an unpleasant stickiness at his flank.

Chuuya felt around for the source of the pain with his fingers. There was a metal pole piercing the muscle in his side. A piece of the wall must have

stabbed him when it was destroyed. Only the tip of the pole was sticking out of him, but the other end was hidden under the rubble, which made it impossible to tell how long the pole was.

After Verlaine kicked him straight through several rooms, Chuuya eventually hit a wall and was buried under the debris. He hadn't been able to manipulate gravity and protect himself from the successive impacts. Now he was bleeding all over his body, and the wound in his side was especially deep.

It was rare for him to get injured, so he wasn't used to judging how deep a wound was from the pain or the severity of his injuries. Even if he got a little hurt during a mission, the Port Mafia's extraordinary medical personnel had him healed within a few days.

Extraordinary doctors like Doc.

The name of Chuuya's friend calmed him. Doc was gone now. And not just him; all of Chuuya's friends were...

Chuuya tried to sit up, ignoring his wound and the pain. Fresh blood spewed out of his side.

"I gotta...keep moving..."

He firmly planted his feet on the ground, then tried to pull the iron bar out while swinging himself into a sitting position. But the very next moment, he was slammed back down to the ground.

He wasn't expecting this. The metal bar deeply pierced his body once more, causing even more blood to spill out.

"Gah...!"

Chuuya looked up.

White bones. Tubes and cords. A resin lab garment. Pale bones that were only managing to stay together due to the gravity manipulating them.

The skeleton was straddling Chuuya and trying to push him down.

"Damn it...!" Chuuya grunted as he tried to withstand the pressure by using his own gravity manipulation skill. Their bodies creaked painfully under the overwhelming pressure.

"Stop doing this!" shouted Chuuya. "This doesn't make any sense! You're *me*!"

But the skeleton could not comprehend his voice. It was simply following orders to destroy the nearest skill user. Its murderous urges were clear and shapeless—and irrational.

Bones screeched. It wasn't clear whose bones they were. The gravity the skeleton was manipulating was gradually exceeding what the human body could handle.

Cold sweat dripped down Chuuya's forehead.

The skeleton didn't care if it destroyed itself, but Chuuya didn't share the sentiment. However, if they kept up this gravity-based pushing match, they would both be crushed simultaneously since their bodies were equally durable.

Chuuya had to do something. But he was fighting himself.

He was in pain. Intense pain.



Wait, wait, wait.

Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. The hell is that? A skeleton? You've gotta be kidding me.

Shirase rubbed his eyes. He wasn't seeing things.

The world before him was warping. The irregularities in the gravitational field were causing the surrounding gravel to float. In other words, there was a gravity-manipulating skill being used, which meant Chuuya was here, too.

Shirase almost dropped the garment bags out of fear, but he promptly tightened his grip around them in a fluster. And yet—these garment bags didn't actually contain any garments. Inside were valuables Shirase had stolen. He'd been looting whatever goods he could find while searching for an exit. After all, both security and the researchers had already left, and he could make a small fortune selling gems used in the laser transmitters or even the supercomputers.

They're just gonna burn this place to the ground in order to destroy the evidence, Shirase thought, so why not give this stuff a new life as war funds, help rebuild the Sheep? Better than wasting them. Man, I'm a genius.

And with that in mind, Shirase started to loot before eventually realizing he was utterly lost, leading him to this room. He frantically looked around. There didn't seem to be anyone else here besides Chuuya and the skeleton, and they appeared to be battling. Shirase caught a glance of Chuuya's

pained expression.

“Chuuya!”

He reflexively began to sprint forward before hastily stopping himself.

What am I doing? I’m gonna die if I go over there! Even I’m not stupid enough to throw myself in the middle of a battle between two monsters. I’ve always been smart about avoiding trouble, and that’s why I’m still alive.

Chuuya’s the one who did the fighting. Chuuya dealt with the pain. He was the one who showed our enemies just how much we should be feared. We took care of everything else, though. And it only made sense. He’s powerful, and he was simply fulfilling the duty he had as someone with that kind of power.

But he’s somehow weaker than usual right now. He’s covered in wounds. I’ve never seen him like that. He looks just like a regular guy my age.

Wait, no—he doesn’t just look like one. He is my age. He’s a boy just like me.

It had finally hit Shirase.

“...”

But still...

Even then, why’s that my problem?

“Who cares! I’m getting outta here! Alone if I have to! You guys can fight about war and weapons and the truth about skills yourselves! All I wanna do is have a good time, and I need to be alive to do that!”

Shirase tightly held the bags, turned his back to Chuuya, and began to walk away with a long stride, carving each footstep into the floor.



The skeleton’s weight increased. A heavy, dull sound echoed along with their creaking bones.

The floor’s foundation was caving in. Any ordinary human’s body would have easily been flattened by this point.

“Stop doing this...,” Chuuya faintly muttered as his lungs were being crushed. “You’re me, damn it...”

A glimmer of hesitation appeared in his eyes. The skeleton’s jaw rattled as it quietly looked down at Chuuya with pitch-black eye sockets. There

was no light within. No emotions. Nothing. An absolute void.

And from those eye sockets—from that nothingness, Chuuya could sense what it was trying to say. Perhaps it was only his imagination, but he couldn't stop the words from flowing into his head. They were meaningless words, but it felt like they were coming from the skeleton:

This should have been you.

"You're me," repeated Chuuya while he stared at the skeleton that had left its humanity far behind. His words were unconscious. Even Chuuya didn't know what he was saying. "So...who am I?"

The gravity increased as the skeleton's face—the face of death itself—approached Chuuya until they were nose to nose.

All of a sudden, there was a scream.

"Ahhhhhhh!"

Someone had charged at the skeleton and knocked it aside. The skeleton and the shadowy figure who had lunged at it rolled on the floor in a pile.

Chuuya opened his eyes wide. He recognized the shadowy figure.

"Shirase...?!"

Shirase's voice cracked as he screamed something unintelligible before getting back to his feet. The skeleton, which had used every bit of gravity it could to push Chuuya down, was powerless against the sidelong impact that broke off its right arm at the elbow.

But that hardly slowed it down at all. It opened its jaw to tear into Shirase's flesh. Shirase lifted his garment bags, and the skeleton chewed right through them. The cracking of gems and electronics was painfully audible, but the gems were far harder than any bone; the skeleton's jaw snapped in half.

"Shirase, you dumbass! Get outta here! Run!"

"Ahhhhhhh!"

While Shirase wildly flailed his arms with his eyes shut, his fingers happened to get caught on one of the tubes in the skeleton's back, pulling it out and causing a bluish-black fluid to spill onto the floor. The skeleton suddenly slumped forward and seemingly stopped moving for a few seconds.

The moment Chuuya noticed this, he yelled, "Shirase! Pull out the cables! All of them!"

Shirase once again flailed about wildly for a few moments in confusion

until he realized what Chuuya was saying. Rolling in the bluish-black chemicals, he grabbed the tubes and cords—the skeleton’s “tail”—and gave them a swift, powerful tug. The bundle of tubes that continued all the way to the neighboring room popped out of the skeleton’s back.

It screamed.

But a body of only bones does not have any vocal organs. It had no throat, nothing to produce a scream. The sound it made was the remnants of gravity and its fading skill shaking its bones, resonating like a musical instrument.

It was the echo of an appalling scream, the last gasp of a crying boy.

The skeleton eventually lost the signal to its command directive and exhausted its energy reserves. It toppled over at the waist before landing on the ground headfirst. Without gravity holding its body together, its bones fell apart. The cracks the skeleton sustained from the onslaught spread throughout each bone until it was nothing but small white fragments that slowly turned to dust and vanished.

And then it was no more. It was as if no one had been there from the very start.

After staring in blank amazement for a few moments, Chuuya slowly managed to get back to his feet.

“Shirase.”

He turned his gaze toward Shirase while clutching his side.

“What?”

Chuuya stared at Shirase as if he wanted to say something. After eyeing Shirase, covered in dirt and dust and bluish-black chemicals, he eventually said:

“You’re filthy.”

“Kiss my ass!”

Chuuya held out a hand. Shirase grabbed it and stood up.

“Let’s go. We should meet up with Adam first.”

“All right.”

Shirase and Chuuya began to walk side by side. When Shirase glanced over at Chuuya, he saw just how bloody and dirty he was. Chuuya was wounded from head to toe; there were too many bruises to count, and he was still bleeding from his flank.

“Hey, Chuuya.”

Chuuya turned around. Shirase looked like he wanted to say something—like he wanted to apologize. Chuuya waited in silence until Shirase eventually told him:

“You’re filthy.”

Chuuya lowered his gaze and smiled. “Kiss my ass.”



The first thing that came to mind when I ran into the room was *Did a dinosaur go on a rampage in here?*

That was how wrecked the room was. It was irretrievably destroyed. The chairs and desks had been warped beyond recognition, the floor had fractured and buckled, and there was a hole in the wall roughly large enough to fit two adult humans. None of the furniture was in its original location. It was to the point that I was unable to immediately recognize what kind of room this had originally been.

Nevertheless, the wretched state of things did not hold my attention any further. There was something else I had to deal with first: Verlaine, the king of assassins.

He stood at the back of the room and looked this way with his hand wrapped around N’s neck. His grip was as casual as if he were holding a sleeping dog’s leash.

“Help... Help me...!” N called out, voice trembling.

I promptly took out my gun. “Let go of him.”

“Him?” Verlaine wore a curious expression as if he was not expecting such a proposal. “You’re not human, so surely you can think about this logically. How would you benefit from protecting scum like this? Are you really going to fight and die for this man?”

“My sole reason for existing is to protect humans from crime,” I replied with my gun still aimed at him. “I was not programmed with a function to determine if someone is scum, nor would I even want such a function.”

“I’m jealous.” Verlaine chuckled cynically and looked down at his hand. “But don’t worry. I’m not going to kill him...without making sure he suffers.”

I suddenly heard a voice coming from behind.

“You’re not going to get any information out of him, Verlaine. Not even if you take him back with you and torture him.”

Verlaine looked in the direction of the voice, mildly surprised.

“Dazai...”

“Hey. What a coincidence running into each other here, huh?” Dazai came strolling over as if he were taking a neighborhood constitutional before stopping by my side.

“Seeing as you’re here...I can only assume that means you double-crossed me,” said Verlaine.

“Hey, you make me sound like the bad guy when you put it like that. I was never on your side to begin with. I’m on *their* side.”

“‘Their side’? I find it hard to believe someone like you even takes sides.”

“Heh... You really are a joy to talk to.”

Dazai smirked ambiguously.

Dazai and Verlaine—the two superhumans stared at one another in silence, wearing smiles no ordinary person could understand.

During their exchange, I ran my combat evaluation module. I had a gun, but no matter how I ran the numbers, our chance of winning never exceeded 0.1 percent. Firing my weapon now would be a poor strategy. My only choice was to wait and see how the situation developed.

However, the situation changed far more quickly than I imagined.

“Hey, Verlaine,” Dazai suddenly said as if he had realized something. “You should probably keep your head down.” He lowered his head until it was chest level.

Verlaine stared dubiously, but the very next moment, two blocks of rubble flew through the air like cannonballs. One whizzed right past where Dazai’s head had been a second ago and then broke apart; the other one collided with Verlaine. Verlaine reflexively blocked with his arms, which shattered the slab of concrete into many pieces.

“The hell do you think you’re doin’, Dazai?!” came an enraged voice. “How dare you show your stupid-ass face to me without my permission!”

“Hey, Chuuya. How was the torture?” Only the corners of Dazai’s eyes lifted in a smirk. “I was planning on saving you before you got tortured, but that would’ve been way too boring, so I decided to take my time instead.”

“You *what*?!”

Verlaine stood in mute amazement for a few moments before nodding as if he had figured out what was going on. “Now I get it. I finally see how you two did it.”

Master Chuuya and Dazai stood side by side. There was something surprisingly perfect about it.

Two young men with completely different personalities...

“I heard that you two managed to kill Rimbaud on your own.”

“And you’re planning on avenging him, Verlaine?” asked Dazai.

“Not at all.” Verlaine shook his head, then stared off into the distance. “He was already dead long before you two killed him. To me, at least. He died nine years ago the moment I attacked him from behind.”

Dazai observed his expression, then took a step forward.

“Do you know why I’m here, Verlaine?” His gaze was clever, calculating. “Because I’m done buying time. You’re going to die. You shouldn’t have crossed the Port Mafia.”

But Verlaine simply shrugged at the chilling death threat. “We’ll see about that. I’ve been similarly threatened countless times, but they’re always wrong.”

Verlaine tightened his grip around the trembling researcher’s neck, then started to retreat. I promptly followed him, my gun still pointed at his head.

“Your skill is powerful, but I already have a good idea of what you can and can’t do,” Dazai quietly added. “All I need to do is use an even greater power to kill you.”

Verlaine burst into laughter. Blissful laughter. “You have a good idea of what my powers can do?”

Right as he raised his arms toward the ceiling, his carefree smile vanished. Every one of my gauges simultaneously went berserk.

“Oh no” was what I tried to say, but the sound was absorbed into nothingness. The light in the room vanished, and a shock wave followed shortly thereafter.

A shock wave, then a black light.

It was anyone’s guess as to how many seconds went by. The powerful electromagnetic wave temporarily shut down my external sensor, so I made sure to check my surroundings the moment I could see again.

Master Chuuya and Dazai were still safe. They hadn't moved from their previous position, but they were staring blankly at the ceiling, their mouths agape. I quickly followed their gazes...and realized the ceiling was gone.

"Hey, dipshit. You said ya had a good idea of what he could and couldn't do, right?"

"Yep."

I realized there was a cold breeze blowing past us. It was coming from outside—specifically, from the sky.

"Didja know he could do that, too?"

A colossal hole was where the ceiling used to be. Dozens of floors of the underground facility had been penetrated, creating a tunnel straight back to the surface. The hollowed floors continued into the distance in a concentric pattern, and at the very end was a small cutout of the evening sky. Neither N nor Verlaine was anywhere in sight.

Nobody said a word. All we could do was look skyward as if in prayer, sensing that something not of this world was about to emerge.

[CODE:04] O grantors of dark disgrace

An excerpt from Rimbaud's journal:

Date: ■■■ / ■■■■

DGSS Operations Division, Special Operations Command

Undercover Agent: ■■■■■■ ■■■■■■

Fair weather. Evening. Waning moon.

The mouse scurries ahead.

A shadow amid the gray evening.

The noble female mouse scurries ahead.

A gray shadow in the darkness.

*I gaze up at the moon with a pipe in my mouth,
delighting in the leisure.*

Only when the pipe has cooled will I go.

*Once I leave, and my hollow footsteps are no more,
perhaps all that remains will be death, bodies, blood, agony,
and an unfortunate end.*

Date: ■■■ / ■■■■

DGSS Operations Division, Special Operations Command

Undercover Agent: ■■■■■■ ■■■■■■

Rain. Midnight. Waning moon.

I am writing this after crawling out of the mouse hole.

I am in a leaky brick house. I can hear the rain seeping in from somewhere. The lantern by my bedside is too dark to even see my wine. My handwriting must be close to illegible once again. But as of right now, I don't mind it.

Because I want to write about what transpired.

Up until only two hours ago, I was in the rebel forces'—the May Uprising's—hidden cellar. Everything is over now. The results were exceptional. That is, if you're one of the higher-ups.

I, on the other hand, do not consider this mission a success. The moment I stepped into the cellar, the rebels were already there together. And in the end, he died.

I referred to all the members as "he" because there was actually only one member in this rebel group. It was their leader, a skill user known as Pan.

We battled. He was strong. Furthermore, he had a secret weapon: an artificial skill-derived life-form known as Black No. 12. He had created it all by himself. It was a monster capable of manipulating gravity at will and nullifying any physical attack. Pan could control this life-form by giving it any command he pleased.

But our intelligence bureau did a wonderful job this time around. (I wish they were always this good.) They discovered beforehand that Pan was inputting commands via a special type of metal powder, so all I had to do was destroy the machine emitting said powder.

Upon being emancipated from Pan's mind control, Black No. 12 immediately attacked his creator.

It was a chilling sight. Black No. 12 simply made a fist, and half the cellar was gone...along with Pan's upper body as well.

After Black No. 12 lost consciousness, I carried him out of the cellar. He is currently resting at this cheap hotel.

I wonder what will become of him now. Will the government dispose of him?

It is terrifyingly chilly. The hearth's flames feel so far away.

Date: ■■■/■■■/■■■

DGSS Operations Division, Special Operations Command

Undercover Agent: ■■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■■■

Fair weather. Noon. Strong winds from the east.

I am writing this after putting on my thermal underclothes, fur gloves, earmuffs, and heavy overcoat.

I just spoke with my contact at a café and was given orders on how to handle Black No. 12. I was so taken aback by what I heard that I had the contact clarify the details three times.

The government apparently believes Black No. 12 could be a valuable asset because he had the entire rebel forces' network hammered into his head when he was Pan's guard dog. France wants to make him a spy. They want me to train him and keep an eye on him.

Me? Train him?

Am I even capable of such a thing?

I can't form relationships due to the nature of my work. Friends and lovers alike are liabilities to spies. Both my parents and my previous paramour think that I died in prison.

Can a person like me truly guide someone?

I do not know the answer to that question. But what if I could do it?

Me, someone known only by a code name after throwing away my past and given name. Me, doing something for another person, for a nation, for a friend who had been reborn. The thought alone is surprisingly exhilarating.

My life and death will not go down in the history books. All that will be given to me in death will be a cracked, unmarked grave. But that is fine...so long as I can leave something for someone before I die.

My first mission is to assign Black No. 12 a new code name. And I already have one in mind: Paul Verlaine. It was my real name, the one given to me by my parents.

Paul: The day you read this journal will be the day you learn your secret. I pray that moment will bring you true happiness.

Date: ■■■ / ■■■■

DGSS Operations Division, Special Operations Command

Undercover Agent: ■■■■■ ■■■■■■

Cloudy. Midnight. No visible moon.

I cannot believe it. I finally managed to decipher The Secret of the Gentle Forest. That is where a beast from hell itself slumbers.

And that is where Verlaine's

(The page is ripped, making it impossible to decipher the rest.)



The small moon illuminated one corner of the blue twilight. Ougai Mori was asleep on a train.

Outside the train car window, an azure nightscape hung over the dark woodland, its trees whispering to one another. The tiny city lights of Yokohama faintly glowed in the far distance as if it were another planet millions of light-years away.

There were no other passengers inside the train. Only empty wooden seats that seemed to go on forever. Ougai Mori leaned his shoulder against the armrest by the window, his head drooping as he dozed off. Faint dark creases under his eyes conveyed his exhaustion.

He was on the run—escaping an assassin.

Chances were good that he'd be detected if he tried to escape by car. This assassin was a former spy and an extraordinary one at that. He had been trained by a European government, so outmaneuvering him was Mori's only option. That was why he purchased an entire station and train for himself and cut all the surveillance cameras, thus creating a train line

that didn't exist.

It would be tomorrow morning before he arrived at his hideout. An announcement on the intercom informed him that the train was approaching the station, and the train car gradually began slowing down. There was absolutely nothing suspicious about this particular train. It had to look like any ordinary locomotive that arrived at and departed the station on time. The only difference was nobody would be getting off or on.

The train pulled into the station. Mori's eyes were still closed. The next time he would open his eyes would be somewhere where he was finally safe. Or perhaps he would never open his eyes again.

Only the gods knew the answer to that.



"S-someone, help! Please—let me down from here!"

A man's screams echoed through the night sky.

"You want me to let you down? Why?" another man asked gently.

The dry wind blowing past the tall structure carried their voices.

They were on top of a tower crane.

The crane was being used to carry material for a high-rise building in the middle of construction, located right in between the suburbs of Yokohama and where aircrafts flew by.

"I never tied you up. I didn't even beat you until you could no longer walk. If you want to get down, then be my guest."

The man with the kind voice was Verlaine, who was casually sitting at the end of an iron jib while his eyes were focused on the beautiful nightscape.

"Don't be ridiculous! No ordinary human can just walk down this tower to safety!"

N, pale in the face, was clutching onto the iron frame with all fours for dear life. The wind would hit him if he lifted his head even a little, and that could knock him off-balance. There was nowhere safe for him to go.

After kidnapping N from the research facility, Verlaine used his skill to walk him all the way here. He walked up the side of the tower as if he were casually crossing the street.

“It’s a nice place, isn’t it?” Verlaine asked softly. “The perfect place to go whenever you want to talk in private.”

N couldn’t even lift his head. It took everything he had to make sure his sweat-drenched hands were holding on to the iron frame.

“What do you...want to know?” N weakly managed to ask, out of breath.

“Tell me everything you know about The Secret of the Gentle Forest.”

The wind was strong and cold as it roared between them, but Verlaine’s kind, well-projected voice was not cut off even a little by it.

“I can’t.” N looked up at Verlaine while still clutching the frame. “That information is the only thing keeping me alive. Once I tell you, you’ll kill me.”

“I’m going to kill you either way,” replied Verlaine while chewing a pear that he had taken out of his pocket.

N’s face froze. Verlaine then got to his feet and looked down at N before saying in an icy, hollow tone:

“You should know the title The Secret of the Gentle Forest. It was the title of the last chapter in Pan’s manual for creating artificial skills. I got a glimpse of the manual after the government got their hands on it, but six pages of the last chapter had been omitted. The government was probably intentionally trying to cover something up. You, however, received a stolen unabridged copy from your intelligence network, which means you should have read it in its entirety. Now, answer me. What was written on those six pages missing from The Secret of the Gentle Forest?”

“If I explained everything to you...,” N replied, his voice taut. “Would you believe me?”

“Depends on what you tell me.”

“What if I told you the last chapter was already missing from the manual I read and that I don’t know a thing? You still wouldn’t believe me, would you?”

“Then why did you even bring up The Secret of the Gentle Forest? You mentioned it because you knew it was important. Am I wrong?”

N lowered his gaze and replied, “The pages were intentionally omitted. It was clear there had to be something, so I just used it to my advantage.”

“Enough joking around.”

“I was standing between life and death. I would’ve said anything to save

my life. Even surprised myself.”

Verlaine looked down at him in silence as if he were staring at the remains of a dead insect.

“I see,” he eventually replied, then approached N before lightly placing a foot on his shoulder.

“W-wait!” N desperately clung on to the frame as his body shifted to the side. “I really don’t know! The only one who does is the person who got rid of that entry! It was a spy named Rimbaud who apparently did it!”

Verlaine’s foot suddenly froze.

“What?”

“After getting the original report, Rimbaud disposed of those pages before submitting it to the government. That’s why he’s the only one who knows what was written in them. That’s what a mole in the French government said. That’s why I really don’t know anything!”

“It was Rimbaud...?” Verlaine lowered his foot. His eyes scanned the past. “That’s impossible. He wouldn’t hide anything from me.”

N looked up at Verlaine while trying to calm his breathing.

“He’s the last person who would do something like that. He trusted me.” Verlaine’s gaze wandered empty space. “He gave me a name when I was nothing more than Black No. 12. He gave me *his* name. He then changed his code name to my original name—to Rimbaud. We traded names. It was his idea.”

Verlaine took off his hat. Written in small print on the inside of the brim was the name Rimbaud.

“He was strong. He was the only one with a skill that rivaled mine, even out of everyone in the organization. We were partners. No, not just partners. I was his closest friend, he told me. And to be perfectly honest, it was an honor.”

Verlaine gazed up, the night sky outlining his profile. He then added:

“But I didn’t like him.”

A cold breeze suddenly blew past him as the stars silently sparkled.

“You didn’t...like him...?”

Verlaine stared down at N with a cold gaze, then put his hat back on.

“I’ve said too much.” He looked away as if he had lost all interest in the researcher. “I wish we could have talked some more, but I’m a busy man. I’ve still got a rush job to take care of. I have to kill my last target before

Dazai finishes his preparations. That's why we'll continue this conversation when I get back. Until then, please enjoy the nighttime view."

Verlaine then turned around and began walking away.

"W-wait...! At least help me down from here!"

"Help you down?" Verlaine looked back as if he'd just been told the strangest thing. "You're free to get down yourself. It's simple. All you need to do is take one single step."

All the blood had left N's pale face. Verlaine then stepped forward without turning around again and disappeared into the darkness below.



The train's operator peered into the darkness with one hand on the controls. He was a veteran with twenty-seven years under his belt. Through rain, wind, and earth-shattering bombs during the great war, he had kept his hand on those controls in front of him.

But even for him, today's job was unusual in every sense of the word. First, his client somehow purchased an entire railroad company in a single night—and the trains and their schedules as well. Furthermore, the train in question was going to be transporting only a single passenger. When he complained to his boss, he was simply told to stop asking questions and just do the job, that things would be even worse for him if he tried to get out of this.

The operator focused his gaze back on the view in front of him. The trees were sinking into darkness. All he could see were the silver rail tracks and the train's yellow headlights. That was everything he had to guide him ahead.

His boss was most likely telling the truth. This was Yokohama, the city of demons, after all. Anything could happen. The operator never once got the urge to go speak with the solo passenger. If he did, he would end up with his own severed head in his hands.

All of a sudden, he felt as if he saw something move in the endless sea of darkness. His well-trained eyes locked onto it in the distance. Was it some sort of animal? No. Perhaps a tree was rustling in the wind? No, not that, either.

It was a person. Someone was standing on the tracks.

Before he could even think of the dangers, he was already pulling the brake lever. Compressed air was released as the harsh sound of metal reduction gears echoed, but he didn't make it in time. The train hit the person on the tracks.

However, that individual stopped the train on a dime.

A powerful force sent the locomotive pitching forward, swinging the tail and derailing the train onto its side in the woods. The train moved like a raging iron snake that dug into the surrounding earth, knocking over countless trees before eventually coming to a stop.

The person who had watched the event play out—Verlaine—smirked with evident satisfaction. He had stopped the train head-on without even a scratch.

He began walking toward the car that Ougai Mori was in. He leaped over the train buried halfway in the ground and got past the electrical fire that had started until he reached his destination.

Ougai Mori was lying on the ground facedown. The entire train was on its side: The walls were now the floor, the ceiling and floor having taken their place. Mori had his back to Verlaine. He was stock still, a pool of blood slowly seeping out from under him.

Verlaine had investigated his target's skill in advance. There was no secret a former spy couldn't uncover. Ougai Mori didn't have a skill that could save him from such an impact.

"That was too easy," muttered Verlaine while approaching his target.

He would never be so foolish as to leave without confirming his target was dead. He was always prepared to finish them off on the small chance that they could still somehow be alive.

Verlaine rolled Mori's body over. His eyes opened wide.

It wasn't Ougai Mori.

It was a man he had never seen before who was wearing clothes and a wig to look like Mori. But Verlaine was far from careless when it came to work. He had hooked up a hidden camera at the previous station that showed footage of the real Ougai Mori. When he grabbed the man to check his identity, Verlaine suddenly felt a hand against his chest.

"This was too easy."

The skill's powerful repulsive force sent Verlaine flying backward until

he smashed through the train window and fell into the muck outside. He kept rolling, scattering dirt in the process, until his back slammed into a tree, stopping him.

“...Impressive.”

Verlaine placed a hand against the tree and stood up, wiping the dirt off his clothes while he sank into thought. He caught a brief glimpse of the man’s face. That plus the repulsive force led him to believe the impostor was most likely the Port Mafia member Ryuurou Hirotsu.

A body double.

The Mafia knew about the hidden camera Verlaine had set up, which was why they had Ougai Mori appear so they could swiftly switch him with a body double. In other words, they saw through Verlaine’s plot. Verlaine knew only one person in this country who could outmaneuver him with such dexterity.

“Hey, Verlaine.”

A small-framed man was seated on the edge of a toppled cart.

“Dazai,” said Verlaine as he picked up his hat off the ground by his feet. “I’ve heard people say that intelligence doesn’t have anything to do with age, but what you possess is extraordinary.”

“You messed up this time,” Dazai said dryly. “You let your emotions get the best of you. Anyone could have predicted your next move. Why are you so obsessed with Chuuya?”

“What’s so strange about a man being concerned for his younger brother?” Verlaine replied while wiping the dirt off his clothes.

“Everything about this is strange,” Dazai insisted. “Do you seriously believe you’re even his brother?”

“...What?” Verlaine narrowed his eyes.

“You saw what happened to Chuuya’s original self. There was nothing but bones left when he died,” Dazai added while dangling his legs off the side of the cart. “He looked almost exactly like Chuuya, and his skill was extremely similar, too. Not to mention there are plenty of other similarities between them. So what if *that* was the artificial skill-derived life-form, and the original is actually Chuuya, still alive and kicking, his only redeeming feature being his endless supply of energy? Would a layman who’s only read some old research papers be able to tell?”

“He isn’t the original.” Verlaine shook his head. “I’m not a fool. I

wouldn't mistake my target during an undercover mission. What I stole from that research facility nine years ago was, without a doubt, an artificial life-form just like me."

"Either way, we can easily confirm with a quick check," Dazai replied breezily. "Fortunately, the researchers back at the facility gave a demonstration on how to overwrite the character set inside Chuuya. I'm sure a few of them would be thrilled to teach us exactly how to do that once the Port Mafia kidnaps them. Then we'll finally have our answer. We have plenty of time as well, fortunately."

"You sound like you're certain he's human."

"I am." Dazai sighed, smiling. "There's no way I could hate a man-made character string this much."

After letting out a sigh, Verlaine began to walk toward Dazai with heavy steps as if he were about to finish a tiresome job.

"I would love to hear you kindly explain the evidence you've found that proves me wrong, but you have another job to do," insisted Verlaine as he effortlessly walked up the hill that he had just rolled down a few moments ago. "You need to tell me where the real Ougai Mori is. It's a tough job, I know. Real backbreaking work—literally."

"In other words, you don't plan on backing down, huh?"

"Exactly."

"All right," replied Dazai as he aimlessly stared into space. He even looked a bit disappointed as he added:

"Then, you lost."

A bullet from a sniper rifle directly hit Verlaine's head.

His upper body bent back wildly until he hit the ground and tumbled into the muck. After rolling three times, he lifted his head and glared sternly at Dazai.

"A sniper? Do—?"

But before he could even finish his sentence, the sniper shot another bullet at his forehead. Verlaine placed his hands on the ground, catching himself before being knocked over sideways.

"Your skill only works on things you touch," commented Dazai, looking

down at Verlaine and swinging his legs. “That means bullets will actually hit you. Sure, you’ll instantly stop them when they land. But if we use a large-caliber sniper rifle, which fires several times more quickly than the average gun, we can *physically* hit you the moment you stop the bullet with your gravity like this. And...”

Dazai casually raised a hand, and immediately, bursts of fire appeared within the darkness.

Atop the hills, among the trees, within the muck, among the canopy of large trees—over fifty snipers had fired their rifles in unison at Verlaine. He howled as each bullet struck.

He tried escaping into the woods and manipulating gravity to protect his body. But just as he did, he was hit in the back by a sniper. When he tried to hide in a ditch, he was hit by a sniper on top of a tree. There was nowhere for him to run.

“How was he able to get this many snipers...in such a short period of time...?!”

A bullet pierced Verlaine’s clothing and dug its way into his skin. It didn’t injure him enough to make him bleed, but the number of snipers was overwhelming. There were ten shots per second, followed by twenty, and it only increased from there. It was as if the air around Verlaine had turned on him.

All Verlaine could do was cover his head and curl up on the ground, making himself as small as possible.

“You messed with the wrong guy, Verlaine,” Dazai said with a faint smirk. “I know exactly how to deal with someone who can manipulate gravity. Day in and day out, I’ve spent every waking and sleeping moment think about *how I can annoy Chuuya*.”

“Don’t get so cocky!” Verlaine grabbed a nearby tree and pulled it out of the ground while the bullets rained upon him. “Do you honestly think you can kill me just with a few pebbles?!”

He lifted the tree in the air to throw it at a sniper under the cover of darkness in the distance, but his arm stopped before he could finish... because the tree had been sliced into countless pieces.

“Oh my. You really do look like one of my subordinates close-up.”

It was the graceful koto-like voice of a woman. She had flaming-scarlet hair and eyes the same color. Japanese maple leaves decorated her red

ombré kimono.

Most striking of all, however, was the masked demon by her side, also wearing a kimono. It was tall with long hair and was effortlessly raising a blade around the length of a child into the air as if it were weightless. Its golden kimono appeared to be melting from the knees down, making it clear that this being lacked a corporeal body.

“It was very selfish of you to try robbing me of one of my men. I’ll be willing to forgive you once I take one of your limbs. After I finish, you’d best leave my sight.”

Kouyou Ozaki, a gifted young swordswoman in the Port Mafia and Chuuya’s superior. She wielded a skill-derived life-form, a beautiful beast called the Golden Demon.

She spun her vivid peony-red bamboo parasol over her shoulder while twisting and pulling its handle, revealing a glittering silver blade: a cane sword.

“A skill user with the Port Mafia, huh?” Verlaine sneered like a wild beast. “But what can one skill user and two swords do against gravity?”

He lowered his stance to pounce at Kouyou.

“Who said I was alone?”

Verlaine’s body sank into the ground. Astonished, he looked down at his feet to find the ground slowly swallowing them like snakes crawling up his legs. The stunned Verlaine nullified his gravity and jumped onto a nearby tree trunk lying on its side. However, even the sturdy tree trunk turned into liquid under his shoes and tried to swallow him.

“Hmm...”

He jumped once more, but the spot where he was planning on landing was already opening its mouth as if the sludge had a mind of its own, waiting for him.

“Gah-ha-ha! Run, boy. Run. The only reason a kid like you has survived this long is for my entertainment. Now, hurry up and die. I want that head of yours.”

A colossal tree trunk of a man emerged from the darkness of the woods. He donned a faded military uniform full of rips and tears, a judo belt, and tall wooden clogs. His hair was bristly like needles, and his arms crossed in front of his chest were dense like hundred-year-old trees.

One of the Port Mafia’s aces and a soldier who had survived the great

war, he was known within the organization as the Colonel.

He raised a treelike arm in front of him and squeezed his hand into a fist. The earth immediately began to rumble. The liquefied ground, trees, and collapsed train all rushed toward the airborne Verlaine.

“His skill can liquefy mass and manipulate it...!”

Verlaine kicked off the first bit of liquefied ground that reached him and jumped back, but that area was already liquefied as well. Even if he tried to change directions to escape, everything above and below him was liquid. Even as he blasted it away with gravity, more liquefied earth simply took its place, giving Verlaine no chance to counter. To make matters worse, snipers shot him from every angle whenever they saw an opening.

“Tsk...!”

Verlaine increased the density of some faint dust in the air and used it as a foothold to jump even higher. He was trying to create distance. The Colonel’s matter-manipulation skill generally didn’t work on things out of sight; that was why Verlaine intended to hide in the woods, weigh down a boulder with gravity, then throw it at his opponent.

That was when he caught sight of something bizarre.

It was a watch. There was a watch floating in the air.

It looked like an ordinary pocket watch: numbers on the face, hour and minute hands, a stem, and internal moving gears peeking out from the edge of the face. What was odd, however, was the size—about as large as a grown man’s torso. And it was turning to face Verlaine as if it were surveilling him. Verlaine, who had a wealth of knowledge on skills, immediately recognized how dangerous this watch was.

He ripped a button off his jacket sleeve, increased its weight by a few dozen pounds, and then tossed it at the watch. The meteor-like button, which had enough force behind it to take down an entire building, simply shot right through the watch. It destroyed the trees behind it and disappeared into the darkness.

“You can’t break it,” uttered a gloomy voice.

When Verlaine glanced in its direction, he noticed there was a young man sitting on the ground, pathetically wrapping his arms around his knees while looking up at him.

“There’s no point. It sees everyone. It sees me. It sees you. Eventually, you’ll have to die. It watches you until, one day, it’s caught right up you.

I'm talking about *time*. It's the enemy of us all."

Both his voice and complexion were gloom itself. His clothing was ill-fittingly long, and the hems were frayed. His disheveled hair looked as if it hadn't been washed for months, making it impossible to determine its original color. Anyone could see how bony he was even through his clothes. He looked up at Verlaine while curling his finger as if to beckon him.

The floating clock's hour and minute hands moved with a *clink* until they were both pointing at twelve. The next moment, the watch was drawn toward Verlaine until it was literally sucked into his chest. Verlaine tensed, searching for the vanished clock, but nothing was happening—nothing he could see, that is.

The liquefied ground latched onto Verlaine's leg. Taken aback, he used gravity to push it off, then looked around. He was already far from the Colonel, yet the liquefied earth had caught up to him. It was bizarre.

Immediately, he was hit. A sniper's bullet bounced off his head, sending him spinning through the air. He planted his feet into the muck, digging into the ground to stop himself.

Strange—the bullets were getting faster, which meant they were being deflected with a proportionate amount of energy when they struck him, even though he was stopping them with gravity.

Did the enemy switch to a more powerful firearm? No. This was...

The ground liquefied. Verlaine leaped out of the way before it could engulf him, but the tentacle-like liquid gave chase even more quickly than before.

He swiftly checked his surroundings. A leaf was falling from its stem due to the shock wave caused by the sniper's fire. But it didn't flutter in the wind. It fell straight down, piercing the ground. The attacks weren't getting any faster.

"My time is getting slower...!"

"Everyone always dies, leaving me behind." The gloomy young man glared at Verlaine with a perplexing grudge in his eyes. "My brothers, my parents—everyone. Time killed them all. But I can escape it with this special power of mine."

A skill user who could manipulate time.

A cold sweat began to drip down Verlaine's forehead. Time-manipulation skills were not only extremely powerful—they also defied

common sense. As far as Verlaine knew, only a few people possessed such a skill with the most prominent perhaps being H. G. Wells, a former skill user engineer. Wells rose to notoriety as the worst terrorist who ever lived after creating the skill weapon known as the Shell and simply vanishing without a trace.

Time manipulation tampered with the fundamental principles of this world and overwrote them however the user wished. Time and space were equal from the universe's perspective, after all, and time-manipulating skills had the potential to be as dangerous as Verlaine's gravity-manipulation skill—they could reshape the world.

Soon after Verlaine's movement grew sluggish, a surge of Mafia attacks followed in the form of bullets, blades, and liquefied ground. Even though he tried to evade, he moved as slowly as if he were underwater. Verlaine's face tensed.

Dazai leisurely observed the roars and gunfire echoing through the woods. He looked down at the hellish war zone as relaxed as if he were enjoying the night breeze.

"This is how the world works," Dazai intoned. "It's an absolute truth no matter when or where you go. Groups are stronger than individuals. People with special powers are stronger than groups. And..."

He smiled as the explosive blasts of battle gently caressed his cheeks.

"Groups of people with special powers are stronger than individuals with special powers. There's strength in numbers."

Verlaine enhanced his gravity laterally as much as he could, swiftly sending himself away from battle with enough force to overpower the skill that was slowing him down. His bones creaked from the extreme acceleration.

Verlaine's judgment was not impaired, even in the face of danger. The situation was not completely hopeless. He was going to get as far from the wave of skill attacks as possible, regain his footing, then repel the enemies' bullets back at them, sniping one skill user at a time. That was how he could win this.

There were still only three skill users. He was at a disadvantage, but it wasn't dire—

Just then, Verlaine's skin suddenly started bleeding.

He looked down at his sleeve, only to realize that his skin was peeling off and revealing the muscle underneath. Nevertheless, there was only a small amount of blood, and he hardly felt any pain, either.

He reflexively planted his feet on the ground, but the skin on his heels peeled off in his shoes; he could tell by the slippery sensation. But he still hardly felt any pain.

He immediately realized this was a new skill attack.

Verlaine could see his breath. His skin was freezing over; frost dangled off his eyelashes.

"Embrace the freezing love. Embrace the frozen flower's petals as they scatter in full bloom," came a shrill voice—yet another skill user.

She had long white hair and was wearing a white shawl. Even her breath came out white. Only the crimson rose on her chest had color. Each breath she took caused the nearby trees to freeze, crack, and shatter due to the frost heave.

Verlaine immediately recognized her skill. She could cool the temperature.

His skin was peeling off because it was sticking to his clothing after being exposed to the freezing air. In just the blink of an eye, his body had turned ice cold. It wouldn't be much longer until his muscles and bones were frozen as well.

This skill was extremely dangerous. An attack that froze its target didn't need to physically hit them, which meant it couldn't be blocked through manipulating gravity, either. It was Verlaine's natural enemy.

A sniper's bullet pierced Verlaine's shoulder, causing him to moan in agony. The bullet was cold; it froze the moment it came into contact with his skin, forming a column of ice that only continued to grow. The cold temperature slowly seeped into his wounds, eating away at his flesh.

The enemies' attacks—slowing down time, freezing, and sniping—were a perfect match. They clearly devised a strategy that focused on hindering Verlaine's strengths and exposing his weak points.

There was something else strange as well. Even though he'd retreated from the battle zone relatively quickly, the snipers' attacks still didn't stop.

It was as if they knew exactly which way he was going to run. A target moving at this speed through a wooded area at night would usually be able to evade a sniper's scope and avoid getting shot. So how were these people doing it?

"Kee-hee-hee-hee-heeee! What a sweet face. Hey, I promise I won't tell anyone, but if you cry, drool, and apologize, I'll sneak you outta here."

The voice was nearby. Extremely nearby.

Verlaine looked in its direction, but there was nobody around—no people, that is.

He saw a coin-size hole floating in empty space. It was as if the space had been burnt and was caving in on itself, leading to another dimension. On the other side of the hole was a black pupil quietly staring at Verlaine.

"Yep. It's me, buddy. You're bein' watched. You're never gonna be safe now. Even when you lock the bathroom door behind you, I'll be watchin'. Kee-hee-hee-hee!"

The hole was small, making it impossible to see the speaker's entire body. But that eye alone was enough. It was filled with evil. It was observing, tracking, and constantly reporting Verlaine's location.

He reflexively launched a roundhouse kick at the hole.

"Wuh-oh."

It closed and disappeared before the kick connected.

"Over here."

The voice was coming from behind. Verlaine looked back to find a hole open in another location, staring at him—at its target.

This skill could connect space. The skill user was most likely in another, safer location observing the battle by linking different points of space. He himself didn't attack, and he would immediately close his hole if attacked, so destroying him or the hole with gravity wouldn't be possible.

Just how many skill users were sent here to battle?

"Kee-hee-hee! Here's a present from all of us at the Port Mafia, filled with love!"

Peach flower petals shot out of the coin-size hole before surrounding Verlaine. The petals then began glowing white, which was another skill—

The instant Verlaine swiftly tried to evade, the petals exploded in unison.

Dazai had a good view of the explosion even from his seat on the train car. The white light chopped down trees and burned an afterglow of itself in the night sky. Dazai watched with a faint smirk.

“How does it look, Dazai?”

A middle-aged man appeared from inside the train. It was the man dressed in the boss’s attire—Hirotzu, the body double.

“Things are going smoothly, as you can see. It’s almost boring.”

Dazai pointed ahead. Explosions roared in the distance, and trees collapsed to the ground. Flashes of light followed by low-frequency pops from the sniper rifles continued without end. After removing his wig, Hirotzu put his usual monocle back on and narrowed his eyes.

“I’m impressed.”

“There’s no way it wouldn’t go smoothly after all the time I bought us,” said Dazai while elegantly crossing his legs like royalty. “Chuuya and I almost didn’t make it against Randou, so I made sure to thoroughly prepare this time. Four hundred and twenty-two of the Mafia’s best fighters and twenty-eight skill users—I checked that everyone in the Port Mafia who was currently available would be here to kill the so-called king of assassins.”

Cold mist and explosions lit up the scenery in the distance. Verlaine slipped between the trees to escape, but yellowish-white rays of light scorched the night sky and blocked his path. A new skill user had appeared.

It was an extremely simple strategy: set traps and wait. Chuuya and Adam had previously mapped out a similar plan to defeat Verlaine, and this plan that Dazai came up with was essentially the same. He predicted the assassin’s next target, set up a trap around said target, and waited for Verlaine to arrive to attack from behind.

The sole difference between the two plans was the scale. Dazai had the entire Mafia lying in wait. The overwhelming number of combat units was the key component to the trap, and it tipped the odds completely in the Mafia’s favor.

“This battle is going to last all night,” Dazai whispered to Verlaine in the far distance. “Verlaine, you are the perfect assassin. Your skills are unparalleled. I’ll bet you’ve never been caught and surrounded even once. You would never make that mistake. That’s why you’ve never been cornered by an entire organization of skill users. Randou himself was

deeply concerned about your dangerous perfectionist streak, too.”

Dazai had suddenly taken out Randou’s leather-bound notebook. It detailed Verlaine’s birth and the circumstances around him.

“I will mourn for you, Verlaine,” he began, placing a hand on the journal as if in prayer. “I won’t mourn your death, but your birth. I doubt anyone else will, after all. The only one who’s pained by your birth is you. That’s why you fight. And yet...I think you’re amazing. You resented having been born, you resented the power that you possessed, and you resented the world. And because of that, you tried to accept this meaningless life. That’s something truly incredible. I don’t have that kind of courage. I wish we could have talked more... But it’s already time to say good-bye.”

Dazai stood up, turned his back to the battle, and began to walk away.

“Dazai, sir?” said Hirotsu.

“Call me when it’s over.”

Dazai’s voice listlessly dropped to the ground. He kept walking.

And the very next moment, a black wave swallowed the battlefield.



Verlaine observed the outside world through his muddled consciousness. Blades, bullets, liquefied ground. Cold temperatures, flashes of light, waves of heat. Poison mist and a barrier of sound. Every kind of attack was destroying Verlaine from all directions.

The soil liquefied wherever he landed, crawling up his legs until he was forced to push it away with gravity. Every breath he took froze his throat shut. The flashes of light temporarily blinded him while the sound waves reduced his hearing to nothing. Whenever he stopped moving, a shower of sniper bullets rained down on him. Even when he turned objects into high speed projectiles by manipulating their gravity, the demon’s long blade cut them all down. Every single one of these attacks worked together like precise machinery under the command of a young man with devilish intellect: Dazai.

This was what it means to be human. This is what humans are capable of when pushed to their limit. This is what I tried to become a part of but couldn’t in the end.

Verlaine inwardly laughed.

Look at them flaunt their humanity. Very well. Then it looks like I'll just have to show them, too—show them what it means to not be human. I'll show them the color of darkness this hell is buried in my heart—this hatred that not even Rimbaud could comprehend.

Verlaine opened his mouth, and the hatred immediately began pouring out along with a verse.

“Your hate, your set torpors, your weaknesses, your spite,
All the brutalities you suffered long ago,
You return to us, all without evil, O Night,
In an excess of blood that every month will flow.”

The wind stopped. The rustling of the trees ceased as if they were trying to escape something. An invisible wave rippled through the air.

Thoughts crossed Verlaine's ever-condensing consciousness.

Nobody understood that I'm not human. Nobody understood that I wasn't blessed by any god, that I wasn't birthed by a person—I was born from nothingness.

Rimbaud himself didn't understand this loneliness, even at the very end.

I hated him, but not because he didn't understand. I hated him because he pretended like he did.

Black snow-like mist began to dance around Verlaine—but it wasn't snow. It wasn't even matter.

It was darkness bursting into nothingness. A tiny universe.

Allow me to show them the hatred of something not human, the emptiness of being born without God's blessing. I will show them the hell that slumbers within my truest self, within my core—and within the depths of my soul.

Verlaine howled. His roar transformed into black surging waves that began to compress the forest into nothingness. Verlaine's hat flew off his head and vanished into the trees.

Dazai yelled into his radio to escape, but even his voice was swallowed by the shock waves. The nightmare had already taken shape.

The trapper—the skill user who could connect different points in space by boring coin-size holes in them—heard Dazai’s voice through the radio, telling everyone to run. That was also the moment he realized, peeking through his hole, that Verlaine had suddenly been swallowed by darkness and vanished.

“What’s going—?”

Those were his final words.

The gravitational waves expanded in the blink of an eye and seeped through the trapper’s portal, making their way into the Mafia’s hideout. The abrupt twisting of space pulled his body through the hole. There wasn’t so much as a second for him to grab onto anything. The trapper’s face slammed into the hole, and even then, the gravitational pull didn’t cease. His skin touching the portal was slowly pulled to the other side. The gravitational wave grew even stronger until his flesh, bones, and clothing were sucked away like water spiraling down a drain. Eventually, nothing was left.

The hole in space vanished the moment the skill user died, returning the hideout to silence.

Verlaine floated in the sky.

He hadn’t jumped. He wasn’t gliding like a bird. He was ignoring gravity and hovering in midair. Mysterious runelike symbols surfaced on his skin and began wriggling as if they were alive. Explosion after explosion filled the air. Once one burst, another took its place.

Black particles softly fell to the ground like powdery snow.

Verlaine cackled. His laughter was far from anything human. The sound was closer to thunder, metal being sawed, or trees being split in twain.

It was a beast—a malevolent one.

The evil being—Verlaine—raised its right hand and materialized a black sphere. The sphere floated, sucking in the air and gradually expanding.

Dazai’s expression grew stern the moment he witnessed the black anomaly that appeared in the woods in the distance.

“What is that?” Hirotsu asked fearfully by his side.

“The Gate’s been opened.”

Dazai's voice was hoarse as if he were having trouble breathing. The very next moment, something black shot out from the space where Verlaine was floating.

"Get down!" shouted Dazai.

It came at him like a cannonball before landing on the caboose, approximately four cars away from where he and Hirotsu were standing. The two of them clung to the train as it violently shook like there was an earthquake. By the time the train car stopped shaking, it was a completely different shape.

Half of it was demolished while the rest was bent up like a crumpled piece of paper. It almost looked as if a giant had sloppily ripped the train car into pieces. The hill behind the train had been completely gouged out in a straight line along with any soil, rocks, or trees in its path. The destruction was far greater than what a single skill should be capable of.

"What on earth...just happened...?" muttered Hirotsu.

"It's the same," observed Dazai, his expression tense. "It's just like when he escaped the research facility by instantly creating a hole through the ceiling all the way to the surface. It's also the same phenomenon that happened two days ago when Chuuya leveled an entire city block. Apparently, Verlaine said he was 'opening a Gate,' and that right there is what's on the other side. Take a good look, Hirotsu... That power's in a class of its own."

Dazai watched as the black sphere in the forest rapidly started expanding once more. The wind began to howl—a harbinger of destruction.

"No... What is that...? What is that?!"

The gloomy young man, who controlled the pocket watch in the sky, could do nothing but clench his trembling jaw in fear at the destruction hanging over his head.

A monster was controlling the black spheres.

One had dropped to the surface only a moment earlier, and that alone killed three snipers. The skill user who could produce rays of light died as well. But it wasn't just any death. Their bodies were pulled apart like clay simply because they got too close to the sphere. They screamed as their

flesh, blood, and bones—everything—got sucked into the black orb. No part of them remained.

Glaring down at the surface like a god was Verlaine. His eyes were not human. There wasn't a glimmer of thought within. They showed no signs of strategizing or calculating. This being was reflexively destroying anything vaguely hostile in its environs—nothing more.

Two more black spheres emerged—one on each side of Verlaine about as wide as an adult human was tall. They were surrounded by faint aureoles glowing red.

The gloomy young man instantly knew that touching one of those meant death. No—simply being near one meant death.

“No... Why...? Why?!”

When he immediately turned around to run away, he saw a woman standing right in front of him.

It was the skill user with white hair and a white shawl who could freeze anything. She was idly staring up at the calamity in the sky, not alarmed in the slightest. She expressed neither fear nor animosity. All she could do was follow orders; the only time she felt something was when she was given orders.

A black sphere of destruction slowly descended upon her, but she didn't run. She simply gazed at it as if she were admiring its beauty.

“Karen!”

His body was moving on its own before he could even process what was happening. The young man pushed the skill user named Karen away with his slender, frail arms, and the very next moment, his upper body was torn off at the waist by the gravity.

The black sphere quickly devoured his lower body while he was pulled upside down into the sky. He followed Karen with his eyes as she rolled off the cliffside he had pushed her over. She was out of the sphere's range of destruction now.

Thank goodness, he thought with a smile, but even that smile was sucked into the sphere and disappeared only a second later. Nothing of the man remained.

Dazai was receiving rapid updates on the battle via radio:

Squad Three, annihilated. Squad Five, no survivors. Squad Eight, unresponsive.

He listened to the reports with his eyes closed, then stood, listening carefully as if it were music. His face was blank, emotionless.

“Dazai, sir. It’s time to leave.” Hirotsu waved Dazai over, urging him to run.

“It’s no use. There’s no escaping that power,” Dazai said languidly with his eyes still closed. “Verlaine was strong but not invincible. As extraordinary as his skill was, he could only manipulate the gravity of whatever he touched. That’s why we were able to overwhelm him with nonphysical skills like frost, light, sound, and time. But *that* Verlaine is different. Those black hole projectiles can crush people into dust even from a distance. They’re spheres of gravity that have condensed space to its absolute limit, and as long as gravitational waves can affect space itself, then no shield or wall can protect us from them. That right there is this world’s ultimate spear.”

He sounded as if he were singing an old nursery rhyme. Then he raised his hands in the air, perhaps so he could feel the presence of destruction with his entire body, even if only a little.

“Plus, he removed the persona directive restraining the skill and surrendered ownership over his body. That Verlaine no longer has the will of a human. This creature can’t be threatened or even reasoned with anymore; psychological warfare won’t work. It’s a demonic beast, pure and simple—and undoubtedly the strongest enemy the Mafia has ever faced.”

“Unbelievable...”

Hirotsu gulped audibly as he watched. He witnessed hills being hollowed out, trees being engulfed, and the terrain transformed. Screams of Mafia soldiers followed.

“And...” Dazai projected his voice as if he were reciting the final stanza of an ode to destruction.

“...*everything is still going according to plan.* We will stand victorious if our next attack succeeds.”



High above Yokohama, the passing clouds covering the night sky like a lid glittered white in the moonlight.

Beneath those clouds were explosions, booms, and the sounds of the earth splitting. Screams of the dead and dying could be heard as well.

A propeller plane was flying between the cruel world below and the utterly serene world above the clouds.

“Master Chuuya! We will be arriving over the battlefield shortly!” Adam shouted so his voice was audible over the engine.

They were on a two-person, single-engine aircraft. Although the fixed-wing plane wasn’t that fast, it was relatively nimble. It was not, however, mounted with any sort of weapon. Adam was sitting in the cockpit while Chuuya was seated behind him, sternly looking down at the surface.

“Take a good look. A single skill user should not be capable of such sheer destruction!” Adam yelled as he gazed at the catastrophe below while recording it. “More importantly, the duration until its evaporation is several orders of magnitude greater than any ordinary black holes created through physical processes. Are you certain you want to land on top of that?”

Chuuya didn’t respond as he coldly glared down at the surface.

“My risk-evaluation module is recommending we retreat,” Adam said sternly. “Simply avoiding that black sphere is not going to be enough. Do not be fooled by its appearance. It looks black because it is absorbing light and preventing it from escaping—however, those sucked into the sphere will not merely be crushed to death. Their bodies will be torn to shreds until there is nothing left. You see that wavering red halo of light around the sphere’s surface—specifically, the light outside the event horizon? That aureole is the concentration of light around the sphere by means of a gravitational lens. The redshift, which is attributed to the Doppler effect, is making it appear red. Put simply, you could even call that thing a hit box. Once you get close enough to touch it, the tidal force—that is, the difference between the gravity close to the black hole and the gravity far away from it—would tear you to bits until you died.”

“You’re puttin’ me to sleep, damn it,” barked Chuuya, still staring down at the surface. “One look at that thing makes it obvious that it’s dangerous. I’ve experienced it myself, after all.”

Light illuminating the past glowed in Chuuya’s eyes. Only two days ago, Verlaine had grabbed him at the roadside and forced the Gate open inside

him. That alone made an entire building crumble into nothingness in the blink of an eye.

The same thing was happening now, but in continuous succession. It was hell on earth.

Over half the trees in sight had been destroyed, turning the forest into a wasteland. Had this battle happened in the heart of Yokohama, then there would have been thousands, if not tens of thousands, of casualties. That was why Dazai chose this remote area as the battleground.

"This really pisses me off. Everything ended up going just how Dazai planned it," Chuuya spat. "But there's no goin' back now. Verlaine has to pay, and I'm the only one who has a shot at making that happen, since we have the same skill."

"Please be careful," Adam said with a nod. "Even with your skill, if you make direct contact with that sphere of gravity, you will not be able to fully neutralize the effects. If possible, approaching the enemy from directly above without being noticed would be—"

His voice vanished midsentence, then was followed by a scream:

"Watch out!"

Not a moment later, the sphere of gravity was already right before their eyes. Adam swiftly pushed the yoke back to evade, but the violent gale, created by the extraordinary suction force, was causing him to lose control of the aircraft. The plane was doomed; there was no escaping this onslaught.

Adam pulled the ejector-release device on his seat as quickly as he could, launching both Chuuya and himself out of the aircraft. The gravitational sphere immediately tore the aircraft into pieces and swallowed it.

They both flew through the air. Adam then grabbed onto Chuuya's wrist. There was a sudden *pop*, followed by two parachutes opening.

"This isn't gonna work! We're basically sitting ducks! Adam, cut the parachute lines!"

"But—"

"Do it!"

Adam pulled the automatic pistol out of the holster at his waist and fired four consecutive shots, each precisely cutting a paracord. After a brief delay, Adam and Chuuya were free-falling toward the ground.

“Impressive.” Chuuya grinned. “Now, let’s do this! Adam, calculate the orbit of our free fall!”

“Very well.”

Adam slipped behind Chuuya, then pulled a cord out of the port in his waist. This was normally used to connect another port with a wired communications device, but he wrapped it around Chuuya’s waist and shoulders, then tucked it back into his own waist. The two became one single bullet falling through the night sky.

“Initiating gliding phase.”

Adam pressed both of his sides, and protrusions popped out, which he immediately pulled. A silver sheet suddenly appeared that formed triangular bat-like wings from his arms to his waist. The wings picked up the nighttime wind, transforming Adam and Chuuya’s free fall into a diagonal glide.

“These artificial patagia were created for chasing after fleeing criminals at a high altitude,” he explained while still staring ahead. “I will maneuver our orbit; you should focus on neutralizing the opposing gravitational force!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

The roaring wind rushed past Chuuya’s ears. But despite the high wind pressure blowing against his eyes, he didn’t even squint. His eyes remained locked on the target. Chuuya and Adam were flying right into the enemy like a shooting star.

“Damn you to hell, Dazai! I’m gonna string ya upside down once we get back!”



Two hours earlier:

Dazai was hanging upside down. His legs were tied together and wrapped around the end of a street lamp.

“Which is why we need to have you, Chuuya, leap out of an airplane to get near Verlaine and defeat him.”

Despite hanging upside down, Dazai’s expression was no different from usual: sleepy-eyed and slightly annoyed.

“Uh-huh.”

Chuuya took a seat in a chair while hostilely glaring at Dazai. Adam glanced between them, perplexed.

“Er... What exactly is going on here?”

They were on the side of a runway at an air depot located in a ravine far from the city’s hustle and bustle. It was so quiet you could almost hear the stars twinkling in the dusky sky. Two mechanics were working on a propeller aircraft in the hangar, but their voices couldn’t be heard from this distance. Chuuya was holding a rope wrapped around Dazai’s waist multiple times like a spinning top.

“We’re saving time this way, Mr. Robot Investigator.” Dazai smiled indifferently.

“This is being economical with your time?”

“Yep. After all, the ambush of our lifetime is about to begin.”

Adam looked back and forth between Dazai and Chuuya once more. “Humans truly speak in riddles. I could not find a single analogous phrase in my database for comparison.”

“Look, don’t worry about it. Humans don’t understand him, either,” said Shirase, who was standing a short distance from Chuuya with his arms crossed. He looked utterly defeated.

Chuuya silently tugged on the rope. He pulled and pulled before standing up and walking backward, pulling some more. The rope around Dazai began to unravel as he spun around and around. Nevertheless, he continued explaining his strategy.

“We’re going to use a body double for Mori and lure Verlaine out. Once we do that, we’ll have every fighter in the Mafia strike, and if we manage to drive him into a corner, he’s probably gonna open his Gate as a last resort. Once that happens, we’ll have Chuuya approach him by plane,” he said as he slowly twirled, his voice getting louder or softer depending on which way he was facing. When the rope had been pulled as taut as possible, and Dazai was hanging diagonally, Chuuya let go.

“Once Chuuya gets close...” Dazai spun.

“...Verlaine’s probably...” And spun.

“...going to attack...” And spun.

“...but that’s...” And spun.

“...exactly what we want...” And spun.

“...because Chuuya’s going to use...” And spun.

“...his ability to neutralize gravity...” And spun.

“...until he’s close enough...” And spun.

“...to touch him.” Dazai stopped spinning. “And once that happens, we win— *Blergh*.”

He vomited.

Adam watched almost as if he pitied him. “I am still having trouble comprehending what is going on.”

Chuuya returned with more rope, which he began tying around Dazai’s waist. “I’m gettin’ my revenge while he explains the plan.”

“Uh-huh...”

“I have every right to, considering what he did. He’s the one who leaked info about N to Verlaine to buy time, knowing that I’d be tortured. The detective died as a result of that, too, so there’s no way I’m lettin’ this bastard off scot-free,” Chuuya explained, shooting Dazai a menacing glare. “I’ve got a hundred and ninety methods for exacting my revenge on him, and this is the second mildest out of ’em all. If I went with just about anything else, he wouldn’t be able to work the control tower during the upcoming fight. Pisses me off, but I had to compromise somewhere.”

“Uh-huh.” Adam’s neck faintly moved as if he didn’t know whether to nod or tilt his head to the side in confusion. “I understand no better now than before I heard the explanation.”

“Don’t sweat it, Adam, old chap. I didn’t catch a lick of that either!” Shirase said, patting Adam on the shoulder in encouragement.

“‘Old chap’...?”

“Allow me to continue,” said Dazai with his ever-unchanging expression. “Once Verlaine fully opens his Gate, a singularity monster will be controlling his mind. He’ll be asleep, essentially, and this monster will automatically attack anything hostile. That’s what we’ll be exploiting. Verlaine won’t be able to make any rational judgments in this state, which means he won’t react to any nonhostile contact. That’s why we’re going to have one group attack and act as a decoy while Chuuya approaches him unarmed.”

Dazai paused, then smirked with a sense of grim destruction.

“Then we slowly feed him poison—tenderly, lovingly, like giving candy to a child.”



Chuuya rapidly glided, tearing through the night sky like a flash of lightning. The wind howled into his ears like a thousand wolves, but he was not afraid. His body had become an arrow that was shooting straight for Verlaine.

Verlaine looked in Chuuya's direction. Verlaine's eyes were clouded over with an utterly pure, transparent emotion: hatred.

He cast his overwhelmingly spiteful gaze upon all living creatures, hitting them like a wave that would make the average human lose consciousness. Chuuya, however, didn't even blink.

Verlaine created a black sphere and threw it at Chuuya.

"Enemy projectile approaching! Calculating a change in trajectory via air pressure and gravity. Preparing to rapidly descend and evade!" Adam shouted as he switched his position.

He folded his wings, causing him and Chuuya to rapidly descend the night sky like a seagull diving into the ocean. The cannonball of gravity immediately flew over their heads, which was enough to cause them to rise.

Chuuya looked back at Verlaine. They were moving with such incredible speed; at this rate, they were bound to collide into him in only a dozen or so seconds.

Dazai's plan was thorough. Verlaine was weak to poison just like Chuuya, but of course, Verlaine had full knowledge of this weakness. He would never carelessly eat something that could be poisonous, and he would deflect any projectiles or poison-coated bullets with his skill.

That was why Dazai purposely had Verlaine open his Gate. He wanted to rob Verlaine of his free will and judgment. Dazai said they mustn't attack him because he would counter with an even more powerful attack. They couldn't express any hostility, either, because they would be met with a hatred hundreds of times more powerful. Chuuya was to approach Verlaine without any ill will, pat him on the shoulder like a friend, then stuff poison into his mouth.

Adam was in charge of creating the poison. It was a very small amount of liquid in a clear pouch, less than the amount of saliva produced from spitting on the ground. And yet once ingested, it would take a mere five

seconds for the target to lose consciousness and never wake up again.

“Second wave incoming!” Adam’s shout returned Chuuya’s focus to the enemy. “That was quick! The Schwarzschild radius is slowly increasing as well!”

He was not seeing things. A colossal black sphere big enough to swallow an entire car was already forming over Verlaine’s right hand. He threw it like a cannonball.

Adam, however, was still off-balance from rapidly descending a moment earlier. It wasn’t long before the sphere was right in front their faces.

“We won’t be able to dodge it...!” Adam yelled.

Chuuya opened his eyes wide.

“Ahhhhhh!” he shouted while releasing his skill in its entirety.

He grabbed onto Adam, reversing their bodies’ gravity to neutralize the black hole’s pull.

Every vein in Chuuya’s body began to bubble. His bones and muscles creaked. This domain defied common sense—nothing like it could be found on earth but only in space nearby massive celestial bodies. It was a world outside of reason that no human could ever reach alive.

Their environs distorted. Even their voices were absorbed into the black sphere. The enhanced gravity slowed the flow of time, making their surroundings appear to be moving faintly faster. Even those surroundings became warped under the gravity, making it difficult to see anything.

It seemed like an eternity had gone by until Chuuya had finally pulled them out of the giant gravitational sphere as if he were holding his breath and swimming through a giant bubble. His clothing was torn to shreds. Every blood vessel in his body ached terribly after being ripped apart, but at least he was still alive. Nothing serious.

“Incredible!” Adam cried, impressed. “Master Chuuya, you are perhaps the first person on earth to ever go through a gravitational field like that and survive!”

“What an honor.” Chuuya’s voice remained stiff. “But it’s still a little too early to be proud of myself just yet. Take a look at him.”

As he called attention to something up ahead, Adam followed his gaze. He gasped.

A myriad of black spheres was forming around Verlaine’s hands. There were probably over twenty of them around the same size as the one that just

hit Chuuya and Adam. This cluster of spherical black demons was not of this world. They seemed to come from the abyss of space itself to devour the laws of physics.

Under no circumstances could the two of them afford a direct hit. No matter how they tried to evade—even if Chuuya managed to increase his gravitational output tenfold—there was no way they could survive that many gravity spheres. They'd be lucky if even a small fragment of bone somehow survived.

Chuuya and Adam were prepared to die.

But the orbs of gravity didn't come their way...because they were heading in a different direction.

Sniper bullets, grenades, and balls of fire were being launched from the surface. The black orbs reacted by raining upon the earth, wiping out the Mafia members in droves. The terrain transformed until the dead mafiosi were sucked into the spheres.

This strategy was meant to keep the enemy's attacks off Chuuya. The Mafia fighters were purposely being reckless, throwing their lives away.

"Those idiots..." Chuuya moaned.

The Flags weren't special. This was just how the Mafia was.

The only way they were going to prevent their boss's assassination was to have Chuuya kill Verlaine with the poison he was carrying. That was why they threw their lives away, even if only to distract the enemy for a mere second.

Everyone in the Mafia felt the same way. They were a cruel, proud group. They had each other's backs.

"Let's do this!" shouted Chuuya as Adam closed his wings.

They began to accelerate even more with some added gravity, closing in on the enemy like a bullet.

Anticipating a collision, Verlaine automatically moved to the side. Right before they passed him, Adam shot an anchored wire out of his elbow and slung it around Verlaine's neck. It was the same wire he used to restrain Chuuya the first day they met.

Verlaine briefly howled. The three of them were now clumped together while descending to the surface.

The monster that was Verlaine automatically went on the defensive, creating a jet-black orb, even bigger than the others, around the center of his

body. The incredible suction force began swallowing Adam's wire. His and Chuuya's descent quickly lost speed.

"We're gonna get sucked in, too, at this rate! Cut the wire!" Chuuya hollered.

"I cannot do that. If I cut this wire, we will never have another chance to get this close to him!" Adam hollered back. "Do not worry. Everything is going according to my calculations!"

Adam then cut the cord tying him and Chuuya together before pushing Chuuya away.

"What...?!"

Chuuya looked at Adam in astonishment. Adam simply smiled back as he was sucked into Verlaine's black orb.

Chuuya landed on the surface, using gravity to rapidly break his fall. The sudden deceleration caused his vision to turn red. He quickly looked up.

Adam and Verlaine were entangled inside the orb of gravity as they continued descending.

The thunderous roar blew away the trees. When the cloud of dirt had cleared, it looked as if a meteorite had just created a crater with someone lying in the center. That was where Verlaine was curled up, not a scratch on his body. He'd fallen to his knees, his eyes gently closed as if he were taking a nap. The ancient runes on his body swam across his skin and shone.

There was not much left of Adam. His body from the chest down was gone in addition to his left arm, and his internal machinery was completely exposed. Artificial muscles and nerve conduction cables dangled out of him as white functional fluid leaked into the dirt. Only Adam's gaze moved.

He looked at Chuuya. His eyes were strong. It was as if he was trying to tell him something.

Do it.

That was what his faint nod was telling Chuuya.

Chuuya made a decision. He quietly walked down the hollowed earth with neither hostility nor malice as if he were simply taking a stroll in the wilderness. He moved slowly with firm footsteps, making sure Verlaine would not consider him a threat.

The man who called himself Chuuya's brother reflected in Chuuya's

eyes. There was no reason to hold back any hostile feelings because he strangely didn't feel any bitterness in his heart when he looked at him.

This Verlaine was no longer human. He wasn't even a character set anymore. He was merely a vessel of raw energy, nothing more than an automated machine that returned hate with more hate.

This is sleeping within me, too. We're the same once you strip us of our outer shells. I finally understand why Verlaine came to me and why he invited me on a journey with him.

But I've gotta put an end to things once and for all.

Chuuya stood right by his brother's side. To his own surprise, Chuuya was quite calm. Verlaine still hadn't reacted.

Chuuya pulled the pouch out of his pocket. It was clear, disc-shaped, and roughly the size of his fingertip. Once the poison touched the inside of Verlaine's mouth, it would quietly dissolve. Darkness would come, and then it would all be over. This was the only way to end things.

His brother's lips were faintly parted. Chuuya didn't resent the man. He didn't even consider him to be a living being. This simple action was like putting an envelope in a mailbox. Like finishing a puzzle with the very last piece. Like a farewell to a memory of someone dear.

Chuuya slipped the pouch into Verlaine's mouth in a detached manner, then let go.

He felt a sharp pang.

Not emotional pain—physical pain. Chuuya's fingertip was bleeding.

"Heh... You never cease to surprise me, Chuuya."

Verlaine was laughing.

Chuuya's blood stained the corner of Verlaine's mouth, and the next moment, Chuuya was knocked backward. He hadn't been sucked into the gravity sphere. This was Verlaine's typical skill that he could use to manipulate the gravity of whatever he touched. Chuuya spun through the air until he crashed into a tree trunk without even a moment to defend himself.

"Gwah...!"

"The first day we met when I opened your Gate, I left a command sequence inside you," Verlaine revealed. He spat the poison out of his mouth and into the weeds, where it disappeared. "That command would close my Gate the moment you touched me again. You automatically closed my Gate. This is the only way to stop me, since I lose consciousness during

Brutalization.”

“‘Brutalization’...?”

“It’s when you strip the persona model’s control and temporarily unleash the singularity beast. You know, what happened with me just now. Rimbaud took the name Brutalization from the verse used to break the persona’s seal.”

Verlaine slowly stood, then looked at Chuuya.

“He was the one who came up with the idea of how I could return to normal after becoming a singularity. He was always thinking about how he could help.”

“And yet you still betrayed him,” Chuuya said while staggering on his knees. “Didn’t you?”

Verlaine didn’t immediately reply as he opened his eyes wide and stared at Chuuya. His eyes were dry. He didn’t even blink.

“I did it to save you,” he eventually answered.

Chuuya managed to keep his wobbling legs straight enough to stand back up.

“Fine,” he said with a quiet gaze. “We did everything we could, but you won. There ain’t a single person left in the Mafia who can beat you. I’ll go wherever you wanna go, whether it be back to Europe or to the ends of the earth.”

Verlaine’s eyes narrowed. “Are you trying to trick me?”

“Unlike Dazai, I’m not twisted enough to do something like that. Plus, I don’t think lying to you is gonna help me, either.” Chuuya chuckled in self-derision. “Besides, I might start hating the world like you one day, too. So I figured observing you up close could help prevent that from happening.”

Verlaine gazed fixedly at Chuuya’s face as if all answers to life were written there. He then replied, “Does that mean...you do not yet resent this world?”

“There’s people I hate, but not all of ’em,” replied Chuuya as he stared off into the distance. The stars glittered in his eyes. “I know better than to try to live a solitary existence. You used to feel the same, right?”

“...”

Verlaine didn’t respond. It was as if his silence itself was his answer.

“Anyway, that’s settled, so let’s go. The Mafia’s gonna be here any second. They’re not gonna give up, even though the most powerful attacks

don't leave a scratch on you. The only kind of attack that'd work on you wouldn't be a powerful one."

Chuuya gestured with his chin for Verlaine to look back.

"It'd be a surprise—a real joke of an attack, one you'd never see coming... Like this."

A hand suddenly touched Verlaine on the shoulder, and he swiftly looked behind him.

And as he turned his head, his cheek bumped right into someone's index finger.

"What—?"

"Would you like to hear an android joke?"

A fine needle protruded from the index finger.

Adam, whose body was gone from the waist down, had one hand on Verlaine's shoulder, injecting a solution into Verlaine's cheek. The drug immediately triggered a neural reflex due to the sudden drop in blood pressure.





Verlaine stumbled before collapsing backward onto the ground and losing consciousness.

Adam shrugged his remaining right shoulder with a mischievous smirk. "The king of assassins was defeated by a silly children's game. Get it? That was the android joke."



An excerpt from Rimbaud's journal:

Date: ■■■ / ■■■■

DGSS Operations Division, Special Operations Command

Undercover Agent: ■■■■■ ■■■■■■

Fair weather. Predawn. New moon.

I am writing a slightly longer entry today, since I will be infiltrating the enemy's military base tomorrow. There will be no backup nor logistical support. We won't have any insiders helping us, either.

Our mission is to steal the newest model of skill weapon. It is said to have the appearance of a young boy but is powerful enough to destroy the entire world.

It's an extremely dangerous mission. Our chances of returning home alive are slim.

Nevertheless, if anyone was to do it, you could not find a better pair than my partner, Verlaine, and me.

What could I possibly do for my partner who has always been there for me? This question has been on my mind for so long. It was only yesterday when I found my answer.

I celebrated his birthday.

Of course, he does not have an exact date of birth, but I decided to make yesterday his birthday. Exactly four years ago yesterday, Verlaine killed Pan and gained freedom.

I picked up a small pudding from a pâtissier in Paris, then headed over to Verlaine's hideout with a bottle of wine under my arm. He seemed more suspicious than surprised. Therefore, I explained things to him.

Celebrating birthdays is a simple gesture that suggests one thing: Your birth is something worth celebrating. No matter what anyone says, you deserve to be here.

And there's one element a birthday cannot go without. A birthday without this would be like a night sky with no moon.

That one element is: a birthday present.

I gave him a black hat. A bowler hat, to be precise.

It was nothing expensive, nor was it made by some famous haberdasher. However, the sweat-absorbent fabric lining incorporates some rather unique materials. One-tenth of that material is platinum, and another one-tenth is titanium. The rest is a rainbow-colored skill metal made primarily from gold, and it allows one to harness Pan's skill. I took one of his experiments from his lab that he was on the verge of completing and modified it into a hat.

Once Verlaine puts on the hat, the fabric lining acts like coils, deflecting any external command sequences that could tamper with his mind. In other words, the wearer can control command sequences at will.

With this hat, Verlaine is one step closer to becoming a human with free will.

His reaction was curious. He appeared neither happy nor surprised. His gaze quiet, he simply said, "Sure, I'll take it." He didn't say another word after that. We drank wine together, said good night, and went our separate ways.

Even though an entire day has already gone by, I still wonder if I did the right thing. Verlaine's eyes were as cold and as distant as the north pole.

But I imagine I will learn the answer very soon.

*Tomorrow, at the enemy's base.
I would gladly walk through any hell for my partner's sake.
So long as there is a god in the heavens, this bond in my
heart, and a future within reach.*

(This was the last entry in his journal. There was nothing more written after this.)



The battle was over, but remnants of the gravitational waves were still rumbling through the woodlands. Verlaine was lying at ground zero among the trees collapsed in a radial pattern. The lingering gravity created a small whirlpool that drew in sound, wind, and leaves. Verlaine, however, still hadn't regained consciousness.

Adam sat him up with one arm and stared at his sleeping expression.

"His pulse is stable. Breathing is faint," observed Adam. "He is sound asleep. The lingering gravity is not powerful enough to be a danger to the human body, either."

He then leaned forward to focus more on Verlaine's sleeping expression. This calamitous man known as the king of assassins looked extremely gentle at rest. He wasn't the least bit threatening.

"Say, would you like to draw something on his face while he's asleep?" asked Adam.

"Don't," said Chuuya, still sitting on the ground.

"This finger actually functions as a pen as well," added Adam as he pulled the cap off the tip of his middle finger.

"I said don't," Chuuya repeated, though his lips were curling into a faint smirk.

"He looks just like any ordinary human sleeping so peacefully like this," Adam noted while placing the cap back on his fingertip.

"Asleep or not, he is just an ordinary human," Chuuya replied indifferently. "His skill is powerful, but that's it. He gets mad, he worries... That doesn't seem to be enough for him, though."

Adam quietly stared hard at Chuuya after hearing those words, but before long he smiled. "You are exactly right. It appears you have reached the conclusion you needed to arrive at."

"Huh? The hell does that mean?"

But right as Chuuya shot a piercing glare at Adam, he suddenly heard static coming from his radio.

"Look at you two best buddies. I heard what happened."

It was Dazai's voice.

"You defeated Verlaine, huh? I'm impressed. When I came up with the plan, I was like, 'Eh, Chuuya might get flattened before he even reaches the surface, but whatever. It's just Chuuya, after all.'"

"Listen here, you little sh—"

Before Chuuya could even rip into him, the voice on the radio continued:

"But that's not why I called you. Have you seen N?"

"Huh? N?" Chuuya furrowed his brow. "Verlaine kidnapped him, right?"

"Of course, we sent a rescue group to go get him, since we could use a brain like his. I'm especially interested in having him take a look inside you."

Chuuya didn't say anything for a few moments, but he eventually grabbed the radio and replied, "Oh. So that's what you were really after, huh?"

"You just realized that?" Dazai chuckled mirthfully. *"I know we had to protect Mori, and blah, blah, blah, but I'm nowhere near loyal enough to fight someone like Verlaine without a reward. That's why I've come up with a plan to learn the command sequence N knows so we can modify you into our loyal company maid who—"*

"Yeah, yeah. Keep talkin' outta your ass. Anyway, get to the point. Why'd you ask me if I'd seen N?"

"Because we lost contact with the rescue squad that saved him on their way here. We can't get in contact with N, either."

"What?"

"Something must have happened."

Dazai's voice eerily faded into the night.



A black Mafia vehicle had crashed into a telephone pole.

N rolled out of the back seat of the unmoving car. His entire body was bruised and beaten, and blood filled his mouth. He was on all fours at the roadside, his breathing ragged and strained.

The front end of the car was totaled from the head-on collision with the telephone pole on the shoulder of the road, and the entire vehicle was still smoking. This quiet area was near the battleground with Verlaine; there was no traffic coming or going. Only the dark trees were watching.

"I can't...die... Not here... Not yet..." gasped N before vomiting blood onto the ground. He slowly managed to stand, then began walking forward to escape to safety. "Not until...I give this message..."

He pulled an old flare gun out of his pocket. It was a dull red. Although it looked very similar to a normal pistol, its thick muzzle could fire twelve-gauge flares.

Next, N began to take off his watch—an extremely ordinary silver watch. His sweaty, bloodied fingers removed the glass covering and retrieved a single gear.

That gear was the watch's only unique feature. The metal had a mysterious glow to it; there was gold, platinum, and a rainbow-colored alloy that most people had never seen before. When the moonlight shone upon the gear, an extremely small character string emerged onto the surface for the briefest moment.

N dragged his leg along the ground as he walked to a hill with a view of the battle site. There he saw a crater surrounded by collapsed trees.

"I knew this would happen... You let the Brutalization take over, didn't you, Verlaine?" N panted. The corner of his lips faintly curled upward. "Then even these fragile hands of mine will finally be able to reach you."

With calm, emotionless eyes, N took the mysterious metal out of his watch and placed it inside a flare. He had the gaze of a man who'd made up his mind and was simply following procedure. He loaded the flare into the flare gun, then aimed it at the sky.

Smoke was still rising from the car behind N. Fuel was leaking from

under it. There were two people inside the vehicle, but they showed no signs of moving. Both were with the Mafia.

They were dead.

The man in the driver's seat had his face on the wheel as if he were asleep, but from the nape of his neck to his waist, both his clothing and flesh had melted, exposing his spine. Putrid white smoke was still rising from his gaping wound.

The man in the passenger seat was more or less the same. His body was melted from his right shoulder to his arm; he died the moment his spine broke when they hit the telephone pole. The chemicals poured onto him from behind had chewed his seat belt into pieces.

An empty vial was lying on the floor in the back of the car. It was clear how the occupants had died: The man sitting in the back had suddenly doused them with a chemical solution. They were taken completely by surprise. The solution melted through their bodies before they could even react, and they subsequently crashed into a telephone pole on the curb.

These two Mafia members had rescued the man in the back seat—N—from the tower crane where he'd been abandoned. They had been in the middle of taking him to Dazai.



Chuuya was carrying the sleeping assassin and half-broken android on his back. Although their combined weight and size were double that of Chuuya's, he showed no signs of struggling, since he had manipulated their gravity to make them lighter.

"Wow. What am I going to do?" Adam said with his eyes closed. "I completed my mission to a T. All of Parliament—no, every nation in the world is going to be thanking me when I get home."

"Uh-huh. I feel like the guy carrying you on his back right now deserves some of that praise, too, though," replied Chuuya. He looked peeved.

"I am going to be promoted without a doubt now. It appears I'll be able to fulfill my dream of opening an android-only detective agency even more quickly than I imagined."

"Yeah, yeah. Good for you."

“In the future, perfect android detectives will protect the imperfect humans, and eventually, human detectives will be deemed obsolete and phased out... No, if anything, humans will be liberated from any activity other than leisure, and with no way to take care of themselves, we androids will be in charge of them... Heh-heh-heh.”

“Quit laughing like that. You’re freaking me out.”

Just as Chuuya fixed Adam with a stern glare, a flare shot into the sky due east.

“What’s that?”

It was a glittering golden flare. The tail of smoke sharply clipped the night sky like a shooting star moving in reverse. The light illuminated the outline of the trees, carving into the earth like a scar and throwing a long, long shadow from Chuuya’s feet.

“...Did the attack unit misfire or something?” Chuuya wondered, squinting as he looked up at the newly formed sun in the night sky.

Dazai watched without even blinking. His eyes swiftly darted about in search of the flare’s source.

The angle. The current time. The current situation. The type of flare. The most likely suspect who fired it. The reason. The goal.

His eyes flashed as if he had all the answers before even a second had gone by. And then...

“This isn’t good...” The words fell from his lips in a crackling wheeze. “Everyone needs to evacuate... No... There’s no time.”

His eyes trembled with despair.

Countless peculiar fragments of rainbow-glittering metal began pouring down from the flare. Chuuya looked at the sky and saw multicolored particles finer than snow shimmering like stars. Their beautiful twinkle was reminiscent of a silent symphony.

That was when it immediately hit Chuuya: They were playing music. It was acoustic pressure, to be exact. A simple, pure musical signal that preceded a melody.

A sudden change occurred. Verlaine abruptly screamed from Chuuya's back.

It was an unintelligible scream. Every hair on Chuuya's body stood on end. Verlaine couldn't possibly have woken up. Chuuya had let his guard down completely; what if he was under attack? This was the worst position he could be in. He'd have no way to evade a subsequent attack.

Chuuya swiftly leaned forward and tried to throw Verlaine off, but that was when he realized Verlaine wasn't merely screaming. He was suffering.

His eyes became bloodshot as veins emerged on his face like a net. He clawed at his chest and fell to the ground, writhing in pain. His entire body tensed to the point that Chuuya could almost hear the muscles tear. Verlaine violently bent backward.

"Adam! What's going on?!"

"These are not the effects of the poison I created!" Adam yelled stiffly.

That was when Chuuya noticed Verlaine's lingering gravity was absorbing the metallic particles. That was most likely affecting him even more than if the particles simply touched his bare skin.

Someone was attacking. Verlaine was suffering because of these metallic particles.

But who could have shot that flare?

"...Got me."

Verlaine sounded like he was trying to groan something through the unbearable pain. Chuuya looked toward him.

"He...got...me."

There was heartbreaking regret in his strained voice.

"That researcher...lied... He knew...The Secret of the Gentle Forest..."

That was when the change occurred. The space around Verlaine began to waver.

"The change in the gravitational field is swallowing the ambient light. Observing frequency fluctuations due to the Doppler effect!" Adam's voice resembled a high-pitched alarm. "Something is coming!"

The earth around Verlaine began to sink like an invisible giant had punched the ground, gradually creating a crater. The trees trembled as if in fear.

"Please get out of here, Master Chuuya. As quickly as you can. This gravitational wavelength pattern is exactly the same as the one recorded on

that day nine years ago.”

“What?” Chuuya’s expression instantly changed. “Verlaine, answer me! What’s happening?!”

Verlaine was drowning in the gravitational wave vibrations he was producing.

Space warped until Verlaine was barely visible. The extraordinarily powerful skill-phase expansion reached a circumference of a few hundred feet. The energy potential inside the phase created successive blue flashes of lightning-like bolts.

Verlaine’s voice grew faint and weak as if it came from another dimension.

“The world...is going to end.”

He reached out with a trembling hand as if he were an old man drawing his last breath.

“Chuuya—*live*.”

His hand then touched Chuuya’s chest, manipulating his gravity and flinging him backward.

“Wha—?!”

Chuuya spun through the air and looked at Verlaine. He was smiling wistfully.

The rapidly expanding and diffusing matter soon caught up with Chuuya, swallowing his consciousness whole.



The heavens split. Black lightning struck the earth. The air expanded.

The mafiosi from the attack unit were preparing to evacuate when they heard it: the songs of angels. Dazai stood on a train car and heard the laughter of demons.

It was just like the calamity that occurred nine years ago. The ground boiled. Buildings evaporated. The heavens were scorched as the earth cried.

The god of destruction was emerging from the other side of this world.

But the creature burning through the forest was not Arahabaki. It was something even bigger, darker, and more sinister. The behemoth eclipsed

the moon as each of its faint movements created a vacuum, splitting the land open.

Dazai looked up at the creature.

“This is a singularity? Did this power really come from a skill?” He sounded downright ecstatic. “It looks like the end of the world.”

Even his lips unconsciously curled with euphoria.

Within the first ten seconds, every tree within a mile radius had been destroyed. Ten seconds later, every bit of land in the same radius was demolished and burst into the air. Another ten seconds passed, and the hollowed earth began to boil, turning into lava that started burning the forest into nothing.

N cackled as he watched the show from atop a hill.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, Verlaine! This is The Secret of the Gentle Forest! This is what Rimbaud removed from the files to protect you! It’s how we turn you back into your true form!”

The silhouette of a gargantuan black beast—the monster Verlaine had become—stood tall before N’s eyes.

“Even the god Arahbaki is a mere knock-off of you. You are the first living singularity to ever exist. You are the mythic beast that came from this world’s very origins. Your creator named you after the mirror image of the malevolent god, the original demon: *Demonic Beast Guivre*.”

The giant beast raised its head.

Its body was fire itself, as was its tail. Its highly dense jet-black physique was cold enough to freeze the night.

The monster had eight red eyes and rusty silver teeth. The high energy within was so powerful that it was difficult to make out its wavering silhouette.

The beast stood taller than a high-rise building; its jaw and general appearance were reptilian, and yet it looked nothing like any living being on this planet. This was a monster that existed only in legends, a ruler of chaos and evil itself—a malicious dragon of lore.

It was far too sinister to call a god. The soil beneath its claws boiled as the mafiosi who couldn’t escape in time screamed their deaths.

This was living, breathing chaos. A creature that only existed on a cosmic scale far beyond human comprehension, its howl of annihilation filled the air.



My main core performed an emergency reboot three times, which allowed me to somehow regain consciousness. However, I had no idea where I was. I did not even know what physical position I was in.

Swirling around me at an incredible speed was a whirlpool of darkness. The irregular gravity was causing every one of my gauges to go haywire. I could not scan my surroundings, either.

I eventually arrived at the conclusion that I was most likely inside Verlaine. There was no other explanation as to why I could not contact the outside world through any means of communication. The powerful gravitational force was trapping the radio waves in here with me.

Even my timepiece was abnormally fast. Perhaps time was moving more quickly here due to relativity.

This place was extremely dangerous.

“Master Chuuya! Where are you?!” I shouted after raising my sound pressure as high as it could go. However, my voice did not even reach my own hearing components. This was no different from being in outer space. A stormy light flashed by my eyes in intervals.

All of a sudden, the alarm went off in my core system, which was followed by a brief report in my feed.

Confirming deployment of Emergency Status Number 812. Approval to use Emergency Response Protocol B. Overriding final mission objectives and unlocking functions B1 through B12.

I remembered everything at that moment: the situation, the estimated amount of damage and casualties—and the *real* reason I was sent on this mission.

It appeared I really was inside Verlaine. The singularity inside him was released, which swallowed Master Chuuya and me as well, since we were

closest. Master Chuuya was in trouble.

“Temporarily putting Emergency Response Protocol on hold. I must find my highest commander Master Chuuya first.”

I used a jet of air to maneuver my body forward.

“I’m coming to save you!”

The space tempest was so dark that I could not even see my own fingertips. I advanced into the chaos.



Dazai watched as the Mafia’s hopeless onslaught continued. Heat waves, fire, and rays of light enveloped the beast. The skill user waiting in the rear had started their attack. Trench mortars, anti-tank missiles, grenade launchers, and a myriad of other firearms immediately followed, covering the monster in flames.

But every attack was blocked by the bubble-like black holes emerging around the creature. Physical bullets were either swallowed by the black holes or pulverized by the light the holes released. Then, they vanished without a trace.

The ice-creating skill user produced cold air, but the beast’s energy was far too grand; the drop in temperature merely reduced the quantity of heat for a split second. The skill user who could liquefy mass tried to make the ground under the beast cave in, but the creature’s feet were far too big. It ended up doing little more than causing them to faintly sink into the ground.

All other skills bounced off the beast’s surface one after another.

“It’s hopeless,” muttered Dazai in blank amazement. “We’re no different than the citizens of Sodom who provoked God’s anger. The scales are tipped against us. It’s not even a fight anymore.”

“Dazai, sir.” Hirotsu came rushing over with a radio in hand. “The mercenaries we paid will be arriving shortly in their aviation units.”

““Aviation units’?”

Almost simultaneously, the deep bass of three engines could be heard approaching from the east. Massive lumps of iron—heavily armed air-to-surface attack helicopters.

These weren’t transportation vessels that had been stolen and modified

to function as gunship helicopters, nor were they spotter helicopters used for scouting and attacking. These were ferocious animals designed with only one thing in mind: crushing the enemy with overwhelming firepower.

The three attack helicopters spewed flames in unison. And they weren't being stingy with their ammo, either. Each aircraft simultaneously fired sixteen homing rockets—a total of forty-eight rockets. A single one had enough firepower to pierce a tank's armor and turn it into dust.

The beast's body burst into crimson flames. It howled.

The homing rockets did not explode the moment they hit their target, but instead, right when they were close enough to engulf it in the blast. This proximity fuse made it possible to attack the enemy before the missiles were absorbed into the black holes. Few, if any, skill users in the Mafia harnessed a power greater than this.

The beast shook its head in aggravation.

"What incredible power," Hiotsu marveled, holding a hand in front of his face to block out the blinding light. "Though large, it lacks any long-range attacks. If we keep this up, then perhaps..."

A stone-faced Dazai narrowed his eyes. "No..."

The howling beast glared at the attack helicopters hovering in the sky, and the pungent stench of death began to fill the surrounding air.

"...?!"

Everyone there saw it.

The night sky was vanishing. Light from the moon and the stars was swallowed by the colossal darkness forming over the beast's head. That darkness began to condense until it became a train car-size black orb that could fit in the beast's mouth. It was pure nothingness; this darkness would devour all worldly logic.

And with a roar, the beast launched that dark orb.

First to vanish was the terrain. The ray of darkness bore a hole deep into the earth and moved forward as the beast lifted its head. It dug into the land, carving a perfectly straight cliff into the earth.

The torrent of darkness directly hit the first attack helicopter. It wasn't even destroyed in the blast. It just ceased to exist after the vortex absorbed it. The second and third helicopters were pulled apart by the tidal power, simply from being too close to the torrent. Countless parts turned into fragments of what they once were before pelting the surface below.

It was over in the blink of an eye. In that brief moment, the beast did nothing more than breathe darkness, destroying three of the latest and greatest weapons.

“What...?” Hirotsu stared at the sky as if he had forgotten to even breathe. “What...was that?”

The surface was hollowed in a straight line, creating a cliff so deep that the abyss below seemed endless. The scar in the land appeared to continue all the way to the horizon.

“Ha-ha... Are you kidding me? It just shot a black hole like a laser.” Only Dazai’s lips were twisted into a smile as he stood wide-eyed. “This isn’t even a skill anymore. In fact, this shouldn’t even be possible on Earth. It’s closer to a physical phenomenon you’d only see in a galactic system or inside the sun or something. It doesn’t even feel like we’re fighting a living creature anymore. It’s useless. There’s no way we can win.”

The beast began to move.

While a single step took seconds, the sluggish speed was just enough time to produce a shock wave with the end of its foot. Nevertheless, the creature was so massive that no matter how slow it moved, it was still as fast as an express train.

It was heading toward the hill where N was standing. He was on the verge of drawing his last breath, still laughing as he looked down at the destruction he caused.

“Ha-ha-ha! Yes, this is who you are, Verlaine! You were right! You’re not human! You’re something even greater! A beast that will devour the entire world! Go forward and let your singularity ravage the city! Flatten the entire planet! Use every last bit of your power until you evaporate and disappear along with the singularity! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The beast as it walked was reminiscent of a moving jet-black mountain. Its eyes saw nothing—not the surviving Mafia members, not N by its feet. Not one thing. All that was in its line of sight were the distant glittering city lights of Yokohama.

“Do you see that, Verlaine? That is your ending!”

N’s laughter turned shrill before eventually becoming what sounded like

a scream.

“You, an unparalleled being, are going to die because of me, a pathetic human! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Die, Verlaine! This is for *my little brother*! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The beast raised its foot into the air. N screamed with laughter and tears in his eyes.

The sole of its foot flattened the entire hill, N included.



Hirotsu and Dazai closely observed the beast's movement from within the woods a slight distance away.

“It started walking,” muttered Hirotsu in disbelief. “It’s heading toward Yokohama’s residential district.”

“It’s the embodiment of hatred,” Dazai said as if he were reading a line out of a book. “It responds to attacks. In other words, it responds to hatred. Some people downtown must have noticed the attack, so it’s responding to their presence and heading toward Yokohama.”

“At this rate...”

“Yeah, millions of people will die.” Dazai took out his radio. “Looks like it’s about time to call it quits.”

He then adjusted the frequency of his radio and said, “Hey, Mori? You should probably run. He’s heading that way.”

Mori was sitting at his desk on the highest floor of the Port Mafia’s headquarters while gazing out the window. The room was dark with a clear overlook of Yokohama’s nightscape. His eyes, however, were fixed on the far distance beyond the city.

The sky was faintly flickering red; the forest fires illuminated the clouds hanging over the battleground.

“I could see that attack all the way from here,” Mori said calmly. “Some rather incredible things appear to be happening where you are, huh?”

“*You don’t even know the half of it,*” replied Dazai. “*That thing’s another Arahabaki. Nine years ago, Arahabaki turned Suribachi City into a giant*

crater the moment it was awakened. If that thing unleashes that same kind of power nonstop within the city, then Yokohama's gonna sink to the bottom of the ocean. There's nothing more we can do."

Mori's expression didn't change at all. He simply took a quiet breath before replying, "Dazai, do you know why I'm the boss?"

"Mori," Dazai chided in exasperation. "We don't have time for this."

"I don't possess an incredible skill like you or Chuuya. Instead, however, I am a little better at something than the two of you. I can always predict exactly how many men I need to send into battle. I'm naturally intuitive in that sense."

Dazai fell silent for a few moments.

"Are you telling us to defeat that thing?"

"You told me to run, but where would I go that would allow me to escape from a monster like that?"

Mori's tone was calm. It was the voice of a man who spoke only facts.

"I am more interested to see how you all—how Chuuya and you—overcome this danger. I'm sure the moment you pull it off will mark the beginning of a new era."

"Yeah, no problem, boss," replied Dazai, clearly annoyed. "Except that Chuuya's probably dead. He was closest to the monster when it emerged, and I'm not getting any response when I try to radio him. Even if he was defending himself with his skill, he's probably in that beast's stomach as we speak... Do you want to know what I'm thinking?"

Mori didn't reply. He only shrugged faintly. After waiting for a few moments, Dazai continued:

"I think this is a perfect opportunity. A skill like that would undoubtedly wipe me from existence without a trace. I wouldn't suffer or feel any pain, and it wouldn't leave a hideous, disfigured corpse. This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance, as far as I'm concerned."

Mori didn't immediately respond. From the look in his eyes, he seemed to be considering which words to choose as they lingered on his tongue. He tapped a finger against his lips in silence.

"I believe you're correct in your assumption," replied Mori after a few moments. "But you are going to face the beast and fight until the very end. That much I know, too."

"Yeah, you're right. That was a long shot. But let me hear why you think

that, just for laughs.”

“My reasoning is extremely simple.” Mori smiled. “If that monster kills you, nobody will be able to save Chuuya, and he will die as well. In other words, you will finally get the death you have always yearned for but with Chuuya by your side.”

A full ten seconds of silence went by until Dazai broke it.

“Hwaaah.”

“Was that a yawn I just heard?”

“Look, I know what you’re trying to do, and it’s not gonna work. You can’t manipulate me. Good-bye.”

The radio then cut off. Mori held his radio with a faint smirk.

Dazai froze with the radio still in his hands.

He then curled into the fetal position and screamed, “With Chuuya? Anything but thaaaat!!”



Chuuya advanced through the darkness. It wasn’t clear whether he was progressing through time or space. He didn’t know if this was even a physical *place* or a conceptual darkness representing the afterlife.

But he could see someone in front of him.

They were obscured by the raging, disorienting darkness, but someone was definitely there. They were floating in space just beyond the faintly blue mist of darkness. It was a familiar face.

That was when Chuuya realized: It was *him*—a younger version of Chuuya floating in the bluish-black liquid.

He was asleep. Countless familiar tubes and cords were jammed into his spine. All of a sudden, Chuuya heard a voice coming from his side.

“Paul, hurry. The guards could be here any minute now.”

Startled, he looked in the direction of the voice and saw another familiar face: a man with long, wavy black hair and quiet eyes. He was wearing a researcher’s white lab coat to sneak into the facility.

Arthur Rimbaud was looking this way.

“Paul, what’s wrong? This child is Prototype A2-5-8. There is no

question about it. What are you waiting for?”

“I know.”

It was Chuuya himself who responded.

He looked back toward the glass cylinder and could faintly see a man in its reflection. It was a man wearing a black hat—a young Paul Verlaine.

Verlaine placed a hand on the glass; he had such long fingers. At the sound of Verlaine’s voice, that hand became a fist that broke the glass. Bluish-black fluid spewed out, and Verlaine’s hand grabbed the young Chuuya, pulling him out into the world.

Time flew by.

He was in a back alley at night. The moonlight diagonally cut through the sky. The buildings were shoddy—made from blocks of wood sloppily stacked together. Rimbaud was jogging slightly ahead through the alley, a military alarm blaring somewhere far in the distance. Someone had realized Verlaine and Rimbaud had infiltrated the base.

That was when it hit Chuuya. This was a memory of nine years ago—when Verlaine and his partner, Rimbaud, broke Chuuya out of the military research facility.

But why? Why am I being shown this memory?

Chuuya thought back to the sensation of being swallowed by something powerful right after Verlaine pushed him in the woodlands. It was something dark—different from gravity. Perhaps that was why he was seeing this.

His head started hurting when he tried to focus. Something bigger than him was trying to engulf him, making it difficult to maintain his presence of mind.

But he had to hold on. There had to be a reason why he was being shown this memory.

Rimbaud was walking briskly ahead. “Our escape submarine is only five kilometers away. We have to throw them off our tail before then, or we’ll be swimming back to France,” he said, never letting his guard down. He possessed the kind of focus found only in seasoned spies.

The distance between him and Verlaine began to grow. Verlaine had

slowed his pace before eventually stopping.

“What’s the matter, Paul?” Rimbaud turned around. “Hurry. The enemy is catching up.”

There was no response.

Apparently, Verlaine was carrying the young Chuuya on his shoulders, most likely because he could make the boy lighter with his skill.

“I’m not giving this child to France,” Verlaine declared succinctly.

“What?” Bewilderment colored Rimbaud’s face.

“I’m not giving him to anyone. He won’t be going back to the research facility, either. This boy is going to grow up in a quiet countryside village somewhere in secrecy, never having to know what he truly is.”

Rimbaud blinked a few moments as if he couldn’t process what was going on. Before long, however, he began walking back to Verlaine.

“Not a step closer.”

But Verlaine’s sharp voice stopped him.

“What are you talking about?” Rimbaud continued to express confusion. “This child should be taken care of and educated by the government just like you were.”

“That’s the problem.” Verlaine’s tone was tense and hostile. “Rimbaud. Just once, I want you to imagine just how much it could affect a person if you told them they weren’t human. Imagine how it feels to be told you weren’t born with God’s love, that you are nothing more than a character set someone suddenly came up with. Imagine the depths of a person’s heart pierced by those words. It’s a pitch-black abyss where the moon can’t be seen. There is no hope. There is no salvation. Do you get it? Even those feelings of despair are merely something someone designed!”

“We’ve been through this many times before, Paul.” Rimbaud took a step forward. “You’re human, no matter what anyone else thinks. The process by which you were born is inconsequential compared to how you’re here now, existing and thinking for yourself.”

“Oh, right,” Verlaine said bitterly, nodding. “‘You’re human.’ I’ve heard that countless times as well. There’s nothing I hate more in this world than hearing you say that.”

“Paul…”

“I told you to stay back,” Verlaine sternly repeated as Rimbaud tried to approach. “You can twist things however you want in your mind, but that

doesn't change the fact that *I'm not human!* You, a mere outsider, dare say I should calm down, that everything's okay because I look and act just like a human? I'd feel better if you told me I'm just like a frog!"

Rimbaud frowned and shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said before turning around. "At any rate, we need to return to France. We can further discuss this matter once we arrive."

He started walking again. Verlaine stared at his back.

"It'll be far too late to talk then," whispered Verlaine. "Once we're back, our comrades from the organization will come in droves to restrain me. This is my only chance to get my way—while I'm in enemy territory."

He raised his gun. It was an ordinary pistol, but Chuuya immediately came to a realization. To someone like Verlaine, who could manipulate the speed and weight of an object, a pistol was no different than a cannon. Its bullets could pierce the body of any skill user, even someone with a transcendent skill such as Rimbaud. That pistol was pointed at Rimbaud's back.

"Do you really think you can shoot me, Paul?" asked Rimbaud, back still turned. "I'm the man who saved you. I granted you human life."

"I'm sorry, Rimbaud." It was a whisper so faint that it melted and disappeared in Verlaine's mouth. The pain, however, was real. "But I want to save myself—I want to save the other me."

He pulled the trigger.

The bullet soared toward Rimbaud's back beyond the speed of sound. But before it hit him, Rimbaud swiftly turned around and activated his skill, creating a crimson cube to shield him. The bullet, however, twisted space itself with its gravity, then pierced the cube and struck the base of the hand Rimbaud was holding up to block. It went even farther, shooting through the subspace behind his hand before eventually stopping.

There wasn't a trace of anger on Rimbaud's face.

"So that's what you've decided, Paul."

His eyes were quiet and dry as a wasteland as he gazed back at the man who was once his best friend and partner.

"I appreciate everything you've done for me," Verlaine admitted quietly. "But surely you now understand the horrible mistake you made: bringing to life a man who should never have been born."

Gravity expanded like a blooming flower, warping their surroundings.

“It wasn’t a mistake, Paul. I am going to take you home with me, even if it means tearing off an arm or a leg first.”

Rimbaud’s subspace grew until it engulfed the back alley. The tense air of battle scorched the earth and sky.

This was no ordinary battle. It was the battle of two Transcendents with the might of a thousand trained soldiers, a battle to the death that would erode their souls. The two extraordinary powers clashed.

“Master Chuuya! Please open your eyes!”

Chuuya’s consciousness was dragged out of the past.

He was immediately plunged into darkness. Amid that raging torrent of uncanny darkness, he found himself floating. There was no telling which way was up. The contradiction in space lorded over this dark torrent.

Darkness passed by his ears along with a roar. Rainbow-colored metallic powder occasionally soared past his eyes with unbelievable speed.

He felt a strong grip on his shoulder and looked to his side to find Adam grabbing his shoulder. His grip alone was keeping Chuuya from being dragged away by the violent flow of darkness. He was so close, and yet his body was a blur beyond the swirling gloom. It was as if he were a dozen miles or so away.

Adam pushed the back of his ear and pulled out a semicircular device that he then placed on Chuuya’s ear. He could hear Adam’s voice coming from what seemed to be some sort of receiver.

“I almost thought you were not going to wake up.”

“...Where are we?” asked Chuuya as he looked around.

It was a raging stream of darkness—a space so large it completely distorted his spatial awareness.

The receiver seemed to function as a microphone as well, allowing Adam to respond to his questions.

“We are most likely inside Verlaine.” Adam’s voice was full of static. “His singularity has been fully unleashed, transforming him into a singularity life-form known as Demonic Beast Guivre. We were dragged in here when this event occurred.”

“Ah,” said Chuuya, stone-faced. “So we’re inside Verlaine. I had a feeling that was the case.”

Something whooshed past his ears, but he could no longer tell if it was matter, wind, or even the flow of time and space. One minute inside here felt like a month on the outside and yet it also felt like the blink of an eye. The concepts of distance and direction didn't exist in this space, either. All Chuuya could do was endure the incoming, overpowering waves of energy so he didn't lose consciousness.

"The logic of geometrical space does not apply here. The flow of time in a black hole moves like a whirlpool, and the flow differs between each location. If we get separated, we will probably never see each other again. Here. Use this."

Adam placed a hand on the connecter at the base of his skull, then pulled out some sort of white wire. He tightly tied it around Chuuya's waist before bringing it around his back and over his shoulders and neck. The metal wire had a clean, stable glow, even within the raging darkness.

"What is it?"

"It is an emergency axial fiber known as a time-proof cable," Adam answered with a smile. "It might look like any ordinary string, but the inside is packed with countless connected vacuum capsules. Put simply, its structure is akin to a tube. Inside that tube are gluons—a type of boson—that move at the speed of light while triggering quantum tunneling. Generally, the flow of time slows down the closer that matter gets to the speed of light, so time will hardly move inside that cable full of gluons. That will not change regardless of whatever is happening with space-time in the outside world, so it acts as a space-time insulator."

An incredible torrent of darkness rushed past Chuuya's ears even while Adam explained things. The wire holding Chuuya in place slightly relieved the spatial agnosia-like discomfort he was feeling.

"In other words, you can rest assured that wire is not going to break, despite the unforeseen circumstances you are in."

"I don't really get the details, but..." Chuuya knit his brows. "Why the hell did you even have a wire for a situation like this in the first place?"

"Because I was designed in preparation for something like this from the very beginning."

Chuuya's expression stiffened. "What?"

"I remembered just a little while earlier." There was an earnest glow in Adam's eyes. "My knowledge on the subject was protected until the

moment I recognized the situation. This cable is one of the things I remembered. European HQ predicted that the singularity inside Verlaine would go berserk, which was why they sent me, since I know how to stop this. However, we do not have much time left. I am executing Final Protocol—my secret mission—before Yokohama becomes the largest crater in the world. Do you think you could help me?”

Chuuya stared at Adam for a few moments before eventually smiling.

“I don’t have a reason not to,” he replied. “But what exactly are we gonna do to stop it?”

“We are going to use the skill weapon built inside me.”

Adam opened the loading bay inside his chest, revealing a peculiar antique camera. Connected to it were shock-absorbent resin, circuits, and a piece of parchment with strange words written on it.

“This was created in Great Britain during the final days of the war. It acts as my power source, but it originally served as a thermal weapon of mass destruction.” Adam smirked. “We are going to incinerate Demonic Beast Guivre in its entirety with this.”

“Huh?” Chuuya’s eyes opened wide. “Incinerate? In its entirety?”

“Yes. Allow me to briefly explain the protocol,” began Adam before detaching his right arm from the shoulder. “First, connect this arm to the time-proof cable’s port. I only have one arm, so I cannot do it myself.”

“Like this?”

Chuuya grabbed the arm and inserted the cable into the port in the wrist.

“Please make sure it is properly secured,” said Adam. “Next, hold on to the cable, manipulate its gravity with your skill, and throw it as far as you can.”

“How far do you want it?”

“Until it is outside this area.”

Chuuya was silent with a stern expression. He looked at Adam, peered into the darkness, then snorted. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t even know where this place starts and where it ends. The strong torrent isn’t doin’ us any favors, either. There’s no guarantee I could even throw it straight. It’s pretty obvious Verlaine’s skill’s more powerful than mine.”

“Even then, I need you to do this.” Adam shook his head. “Do not

worry, Master Chuuya. I know you can do it.”

“Because nothing makes me more confident than some baseless encouragement from a computer,” Chuuya said with a strained smile. Suddenly, his gaze turned serious. “Is this even long enough?”

“It should be.” Adam held up a bundle of cable he had pulled out.

“All right. Here goes nothing.”

Chuuya closed his eyes and steadied his breathing. He then raised Adam’s arm while holding the glittering wire in his other hand and peered into the emptiness ahead.

He applied lateral gravity to the arm, squeezing it until his knuckles turned white. Chuuya manipulated its gravity as much as possible, then let go. It shot forward like a meteor before being swallowed by the torrent of darkness and vanishing in the blink of an eye.

Chuuya clutched the time-proof cable as it swiftly retracted while using his skill on it. The cable and attached arm continued to accelerate, since his skill allowed him to modify the strength and direction of the gravity of whatever he touched.

The cable rapidly unwound.

“Farther!”

Chuuya’s face was covered in sweat. He had to pierce this gravitational space of absolute darkness, which swallowed even light itself, with only his own strength. It was like trying to send something into space using his skill alone.

“Haaaaaah!”

Sweat dripped from every pore in his body. Each drop was blown away by the gale of darkness before immediately disappearing into the void. Just when Chuuya was about to fade out of consciousness, and the cable was about to run out, the resistance at the end of the cable suddenly vanished.

Adam’s arm shot out of the beast’s torso. It looked no bigger than a tiny needle compared to the behemoth. The glittering cable followed like the tail of a shooting star. The arm swam through the sky, falling in an arc in the opposite direction the beast was moving.

The moment it struck the soil among the trees, Adam’s arm shot out four harpoon-like protrusions in a radial pattern. They skewered the ground to

keep the arm fixed in place. Once the sturdy cable tightened, it immediately started pulling Chuuya, who was tied to the other end.

“Whoa?!”

The abrupt tug took Chuuya by surprise. The fully extended cable started winding, pulling Chuuya forward at a terrifying speed like a winch tugging a car. Adam’s arm, which acted as an anchor, was dragging Chuuya outside in the opposite direction of the moving beast.

“Heh. Now I see how we’re getting out of here.” Chuuya smiled with evident satisfaction. “So? What are we gonna do once we’re outside, and —?”

But when Chuuya turned around, he saw something strange: Adam, smiling dolefully.

Adam cut the cable tying them together.

“...Huh?”

Chuuya reflexively reached out, but Adam was blown away by the torrent of dark time, disappearing almost instantly. Chuuya, whose entire body was wrapped with cable, was still being quickly dragged outside.

“Adam! What are you doing?! Didn’t you just say we’d never find each other again if we—?”

“This is how it has to be.”

Chuuya heard Adam’s lonely voice through the receiver in his ear.

“The name of this weapon is the Shell. Its incineration range has a twenty-two-yard radius. The internal temperature is six thousand degrees Celsius. An intense heat equivalent to the temperature of the sun’s surface will erupt around me, ionizing the singularity life-form even on a molecular level. Only white smoke will remain.”

“Around...you?” A bitter realization warped Chuuya’s expression. “Hold on. Tell me you’re not planning on—”

“This is the real reason an android was sent instead of a human detective.” Adam’s voice was tender and weak. *“My core, which now contains state secrets, will be incinerated along with Verlaine.”*

“Don’t!” Chuuya shouted into the receiver as he was dragged through

the torrent. "Are you stupid or something?! There's gotta be another way we can do this!"

"Perhaps there is. However, I cannot protect you while simultaneously completing the mission any other way."

"Who gives a shit about the mission?!" Chuuya yelled while being pulled with immense power. "What happened to your dream?! I thought you were gonna make an all-android detective agency!"

Two seconds went by before Adam answered.

"My dream is to protect humans."

His voice was clear and kind like a parent protecting their child.

"And that dream is about to come true."

Chuuya's body was abruptly pulled out of the dark space.

He instantly passed through the powerful gravitational field at the edge of the space, then slammed into the earth. He broke his fall, skidding across the ground and getting covered in dirt.

"I get to protect you. I couldn't ask for more."

Adam's contented voice came through the receiver before turning to static.

And then it was gone.

"Wait!"

A giant sphere of heat.

The crimson photosphere looked like it could touch the heavens. A flaming membrane enveloped the beast, followed by a shell of heat that covered its feet to its head like a giant bubble, which then imploded.

Everything in its path melted. Trees caught fire before almost immediately carbonizing and eventually turning into nothing more than white smoke. Even the ground underfoot boiled into flowing sludge that evaporated.

Although the inside of the fiery shell was hell itself, the outside was astonishingly quiet. The trees just beyond the shell calmly rustled in the wind; nothing but brilliant light escaped the shell's interior.

The sphere of fire condensed and began incinerating the beast. It howled in agony, but even the air it breathed was pyrolyzed. Not a single sound

leaked into the outside world.

This singularity weapon—known as Annihilation—was created by a skill user engineer in Great Britain and incinerated only whatever was inside the blast radius. Based on one skill user's ability to traverse time, Annihilation could produce a singularity. It was one of the Three Calamities produced during the war and was known for its unparalleled thermal output with a maximum radius of a few dozen miles. Naturally, it was banned from official use.

Chuuya sat down on the ground with a *thud* and simply watched the event play out before his eyes.

The time-proof cable that had carried him outside was incinerated in the heat. It was originally going to be used to trigger the weapon remotely. The Shell, which used the quantum uncertainty of time and heat, triggered a fluctuation in its surroundings' time, hence why the time-proof cable was needed. But not even the cable could withstand the bomb's overpowering heat. Its external coating melted as the inner sealing came undone, dispersing the particles and deactivating the cable before quickly vanishing.

All that was left in front of Chuuya was Adam's arm and the seared end of the cable. He took a quiet breath.

At last, it was over. The celestial sphere, having fulfilled its role, turned into smoke and disappeared. What remained was a perfect circle carved into the melting earth, the untouched trees outside its range of annihilation, and Demonic Beast Guivre's burned-off black tail.

Nothing else remained—not even a mere fragment of Adam.

“Oh. Huh. Didn't expect to see you alive, Chuuya.”

He looked back in the direction of the malicious voice to find Dazai walking over from within the trees. Dazai threw something, but Chuuya caught it before it hit him.

Verlaine's black hat. It had flown off and disappeared right after Verlaine opened his Gate.

“Dazai.” Chuuya turned his quiet, piercing gaze on him. “I don't feel like arguing with you right now.”

“They found N's body,” Dazai told him, utterly disinterested in what Chuuya had to say. “The monster crushed him to death...which means the last person who knew whether you're human is gone. Does that bother you?”

“I dunno. I...” Chuuya stared at ground zero. But before he finished his sentence, he looked back at Dazai as if he had realized something. “Hold up. I know how you work. You found a way to see whether I’m human even without N, didn’t you?”

“You know me too well.” Dazai smirked shamelessly. “We captured a few of N’s subordinates at the research facility. They may not know the truth themselves, but they at least know how to read the command sequence inside you. I only received a brief lecture, but well, I’m sure we can figure it out after I take a look inside you and analyze you for a few days.”

“I’m not gonna let a creep like you look inside me.”

“What? Oh, come on. Let me have a peek. It sounds fun. I promise I won’t show anyone else!” Dazai’s dark smile obscured his true intentions. “They also told me how to determine if you’re human. If you are, then there should be records of your life before you got taken in for research—basically, logs of the memories of your childhood with your parents that got erased. That’s how we’ll check. Sound good?”

“First of all, just imagining you being the only one who knows what’s inside my head makes me wanna puke! If anything—”

He wasn’t able to finish his sentence. The earth violently shook, then faintly trembled as if in fear.

But before Chuuya could even brace himself for what was coming, something else occurred. His head started pounding as if a bomb had gone off inside.

“Gwah?!”

Chuuya placed a hand on his head. He wasn’t injured. This headache was not caused by a physical wound.

Something was flowing into his head. Something invisible.

“*Hate*,” someone said.

It wasn’t a sound. It wasn’t even a word. It was a more primitive, sinister emotion.

“*Hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, hate. It’s all so despicable.*”

His headache swelled with each wave of this emotion until it was racing through his skull.

“What’s wrong, Chuuya?”

When he looked at Dazai, he realized he was the only one who could

hear the voice.

It was *his* voice. He wasn't dead.

The ground suddenly sloped. Chuuya and Dazai grabbed onto the ground and caught themselves from slipping. They looked around, yet the earth didn't seem to be moving or damaged in any way. But the trees were leaning to one side and pebbles were rolling—all toward a single point.

The black tail began to bubble. Particles of darkness emerged. They heard what sounded like mud boiling as gravitons scattered about, contracting like a heartbeat, then squirming and changing shape.

Chuuya noticed that the ground wasn't slanting—the black tail was producing a gravitational force that was pulling them in. It was merging with the earth's own gravity to the point that it felt as if the ground was tilting downward.

"This can't be happening."

Adam incinerated the beast using a weapon powerful enough to alter the course of modern warfare. Or so it seemed.

And yet the tail was wriggling into a black cluster and trying to take some sort of form.

"So that's what's going on," said Dazai with a stern expression while glaring at the darkness.

A fissure opened within the earth. Something was peeking out from within the lump of darkness. It resembled the face of a reptile.

"Watch out!" Chuuya yelled.

Manipulating gravity, he leaped sideways, grabbed Dazai, and rolled into the woods on the other side.

Darkness gushed through where they just were. A black torrent was radiating from something. It did not appear to be an attack, but rather as if a void had suddenly appeared within the earth.

The ground was instantly split in two. In a flash, black light passed through the soil and hit a group of buildings in the distance. A few city lights wildly flickered before eventually cutting out.

"...!"

Chuuya and Dazai were rendered speechless. Fortunately, the buildings were far from the urban area of the city, but if something like that were to hit the heart of Yokohama, millions would die in a heartbeat.

"Was that...graviton radiation?" Dazai's face was tense. "How is that

possible? Its range is even longer than before.”

A monster was emerging.

Its shoulders materialized, followed by its chest. Its head was shaped similarly to the beast Guivre, but its two glowing red eyes were positioned almost exactly like a human's. Its arms were thick, its torso robust. The beast gradually emerged from the cluster of darkness, pulsating as its body kept on growing.

“Don't look at it, Chuuya,” whispered Dazai. “It reacts to emotion. Do not even think about it. Look at something else.”

Chuuya slowly turned his gaze toward the ground, but the beast's ever-growing body was gradually obscuring the moonlight. It blocked out a portion of the light until eventually it engulfed everything within view.

“You won't be able to burn that thing with fire,” Dazai said, still looking at the ground. “No matter how powerful a skill weapon you use. That thing that looks like a giant monster—it isn't even made out of physical matter. Limitless energy stored in the singularity is simply condensing in a single location. That beast doesn't have any organs or vulnerabilities. It will continue moving until the singularity's infinite energy is exhausted.”

“And how long is that gonna be?”

“Maybe a week? Maybe a year?” Dazai looked at Chuuya with a tense smile. “Maybe it'll continue moving forever until the end of the world. Its energy is limitless, after all.”

The beast began to move, shaking their entire bodies with a single step.

Chuuya and Dazai looked up. This monstrosity was even larger than it was a moment ago. It surpassed anything a living creature was remotely capable of.

Its mouth was large enough to swallow a house whole. Its eyes glowed, and its shoulders swelled. The massive dinosaur-like body was emitting energized bolts of lightning simply due to the waves of energy produced with each step. The earth sank underfoot as the monster's claws hollowed the ground and knocked down countless trees.

This bizarre creature that defied human imagination was Demonic Beast Guivre's true form.

“It might've absorbed the singularity energy from that fiery sphere a moment ago,” Dazai muttered in blank amazement. “The researchers in Europe probably never experimented using two skill weapons against each

other—and for good reason, obviously.”

Chuuya turned his gaze in the direction the monster was heading. “Damn it. It’s heading toward the city.”

“It won’t be long before people in the city see it. And once that happens, it’s going to react to their gazes and destroy everything in sight until there isn’t anyone left to look at it.”

Chuuya suddenly grabbed Dazai. “Then what’re you doing just standing there?! If Yokohama’s destroyed, there’ll be no more Port Mafia!”

“What do you want to do, then? Grow big, too, and have a fistfight with it?” Dazai’s icy gaze met Chuuya’s. “It’s hopeless. Isn’t it obvious just looking at that thing? A singularity’s like a loophole in the rules. That monster is a manifestation of something that shouldn’t exist in this world. Humans don’t stand a chance against it. There’s nothing we can do.”

“You’re wrong about that,” Chuuya said, sternly holding Dazai’s gaze for several seconds. He then let go of Dazai and stated firmly:

“There *is* something we can do about it. I’m sure of it.”

Dazai listlessly dropped to the ground in a seated position. “Ha-ha-ha. This is getting interesting. And what are you basing that on?”

“Verlaine—I saw a memory when I was inside him.”

“A memory?”

“It was when he broke me out of the facility and was escaping. He argued about me with Rimbaud, and then they battled. He must’ve fought Arahbaki soon after, and he survived.”

Dazai’s eyes narrowed. “Interesting. Now I see what you’re getting at.”

“Yeah, there’s a way to defeat singularity life-forms. That’s why he was showing me that memory.”

“Let’s hear the details,” Dazai said with a smirk.



The footsteps of Armageddon gradually approached the city as the night progressed. Guivre squashed the suburban highway’s entrance and exit ramps underfoot. The road’s bridge supports, the road signs, and the median strip were compressed in an instant. Everything happened so quickly that it hardly even made a sound.

The few cars that witnessed this reversed through the traffic lanes and drove away as quickly as they could. However, the beast breathed a beam of gravity in their direction, annihilating them along with the surrounding terrain until nothing remained.

Chuuya and Dazai watched the approaching demonic beast. They were atop a large spherical gas tank installed outside of town to store city gas. The highest platform, which they were standing on, was taller than any other building around. They were almost eye to eye with the distant, advancing beast.

"Looks like we have about thirty minutes until the heart of Yokohama is completely flattened," muttered Dazai, staring idly at the beast.

"We'll never have to see that happen, though," Chuuya said, hat in hand. "Because either we're gonna win or we're gonna be dead."

"Ew. No, thank you. Dying with you is the last thing I want. Looks like I'm going to have to take things seriously this time."

"Good. 'Cause I don't plan on dying, either. After all, I still gotta become an executive before you so I can work you to the bone."

"Wow. You sound pretty confident. The jewel business, right? I heard things have been going well for you lately."

"It's already too late for you to play catchup, too. My distribution channels, couriers, shops, and appraisers are the best Yokohama's got to offer."

"Yeah, I know. I was the one running that gig before you got it."

"What?!" Chuuya turned his astonished gaze in Dazai's direction. "So you're the old leader who set up those distribution channels?!"

"Maybe you should worry more about that big guy over there right now. It's almost in position."

Dazai pointed at Guivre with his chin. The demonic beast's footsteps got closer, and its crimson eyes locked onto them.

After staring at the beast for a few moments, Chuuya looked up and shouted, "I can't believe I got Dazai's sloppy seconds! Damn it!"

"Just drop it already."

The beast crushed the roadside trees and snapped the power lines. Gravity irregularities made road signs and bicycles left out on the street float before crushing and pulverizing them to dust.

"You remember the plan?"

“Yeah.”

Their clothes fluttering in the high winds, Chuuya and Dazai stood side by side while facing the beast.

“The main thing we need to watch out for is the unknown. Who knows what’s going to happen when we unleash Arahabaki on Guivre. The world could be blown to smithereens for all we know.”

“The world isn’t gonna blow up.” Chuuya smirked. “Verlaine used this method nine years ago and survived.”

Dazai had come up with a plan. The plan was to open Chuuya’s Gate and unleash Arahabaki’s boundless energy on the beast.

“I already know how to open your Gate, Chuuya. The control incantation N used was, ‘O grantors of dark disgrace, do not wake me again...’ That should initialize the seal command. That alone won’t open the Gate, but your hat should take care of the rest.”

The black hat in Chuuya’s hand was the one Verlaine had been wearing—the gift Verlaine received from Rimbaud with skill metal embedded inside. With this hat, the wearer—Chuuya—would be able to control his Gate as he pleased. It was what allowed Verlaine to freely open a Gate and harness the power of a black hole.

“It’s almost time. Chuuya, get ready to jump, open your Gate in front of that monster, and unleash every bit of power you can on it.” Dazai stared straight at the beast and raised his radio with one hand. “I’m going to give my crew orders to prepare for battle. Are you ready?”

“Of course I’m ready.” Chuuya glanced at Dazai. “Why even ask that?”

Dazai didn’t immediately respond.

He wore an unusual expression, like he was thinking of what to say and how to say it as he tossed the words around in his head. It was an expression Dazai would never make.

“There is one problem, though,” Dazai said hesitantly, breaking the silence. “Unrelated to the success of the mission. It’ll need to be dealt with eventually, but...I might need some time to make a decision.”

“The hell are you even talking about?” Chuuya stared at him and raised an eyebrow. “Quit playin’ games and tell me what the problem is.”

“It’s the incantation to open your Gate. Remember how I said it’d initialize the seal command inside you?” Dazai’s voice was oddly strained. “Once that happens, the past command logs are going to be erased. In other

words, even if there was a command sequence to erase your memories in the past, that log is going to be erased as well.”

“Huh?”

“The command to erase your memories. I told you that, in order to determine whether you’re really human, we needed to check if there were any records of your erased memories, right?” Dazai had never looked at Chuuya like this before. His eyes were serious. “Basically, if we use the incantation, we’ll lose the only method we have of checking if you’re a persona made of a string of characters or an ordinary human. *Forever.*”

Time stopped. Chuuya was facing Dazai with his eyes opened wide, but he wasn’t looking at anything. A breeze blew between them, yet even then, he didn’t so much as blink.

“Verlaine turned into that beast because he was tormented by the curse of knowing he wasn’t human. That’s how serious this is—this issue of being human or not.” Dazai took out a pocket watch and glanced at it before continuing, “We can delay the mission for another two minutes. I’ll put my men on standby. You should take this moment to think. Alone. Because I’m sure you won’t be able to think clearly with me here.”

He turned his back to Chuuya and began walking toward the hatchway, leaving Chuuya behind.

Dazai’s eyes were fixed on the pocket watch. Two more minutes. Nowhere near enough time to decide how to live the rest of one’s life, but that was all the time they could spare. Dazai’s mind was already forming a backup plan at an incredible pace just in case Chuuya decided not to go through with this.

He walked six steps until he reached the hatchway, then began to descend. Right as he had made his way down three steps, he heard a refreshing *clank* from behind. It sounded like someone had just leaped off a metal plank.

The moment Dazai realized what the sound was, he looked back in surprise.

There was nobody on top of the platform anymore.

After staring in mute amazement for a brief moment, his lips eased into

a smile.

“Show-off.”

It was an annoyed yet relieved smile. He then promptly began giving orders into the radio.

“Everyone, prepare for battle. Chuuya is heading toward the target.”





* * *

Chuuya Nakahara soared through the air like a bird of prey, manipulating gravity as the gale below blew in his face. He confidently narrowed his gaze.

Being human. Not being human.

He tightly held the hat with one hand so it wouldn't fly off his head and opened his mouth.

Chuuya remembered his friend who was now gone.

"I get to protect you. I couldn't ask for more."

"O grantors of dark disgrace, do not wake me again..."

Humans have souls. Machines do not.

Then what is a soul? My friend's final words... What if those were merely the words of a soulless command? So what?

Black particles began hovering around Chuuya. His black jacket fluttered like a pair of wings. Energy condensed as the night sky began to crack.

Black flames manifested, and an enormous amount of heat distorted the surrounding landscape.

Dazai stood on top of the gas tank, squinting as he watched Chuuya soar through the air from afar.

"O grantors of dark disgrace," he whispered so softly that only he could hear. "'Disgrace,' huh?"

A black light erupted before his eyes.

It closely resembled Verlaine after he fully opened his Gate and triggered Brutalization.

Black snow began fluttering around Chuuya. Red scar-like runes crawled across his skin. He ignored the laws of physics, hovering in the sky as he glared down at the beast on the surface. Intense heat caused by the gamma radiation filled the air. The night was scorched, and the scenery warped.

Chuuya sliced through the air at the speed of sound until he crashed into Demonic Beast Guivre's face. The great beast's roar shook the land; that single attack alone blew off around a third of Guivre's head. The gravitational spheres of the damaged areas cracked and spewed black flames.

Chuuya, now the embodiment of gravity, flew out of the hole he created in the beast, then turned around and shot toward the monster again, piercing its frame once more. The creature roared in agony as bits of flesh burst from its body, only to turn into black particles and disappear into thin air.

"Incredible," a dumbfounded Dazai muttered as he watched from the top of the gas tank. "So this is the power of Arahabaki."

The beast firmly planted its feet on the ground so as not to fall over, crushing the gas station below. Guivre's heat ignited the fuel in the tanks and created an explosion.

The land was bathed in crimson light, which appeared to have stimulated Guivre. Waves of heat burst out of its entire body. Black flames of hatred spewed from its wounds and instantly covered its damaged flesh, regenerating any injuries. Arahabaki Chuuya calmly gazed at the hatred and parried.

As Guivre opened its mouth, a gravitational sphere of darkness started forming. The massive orb was so large that it obscured the beast's entire face. It swelled bigger than the rest of the orbs in sync with Guivre's rage before firing in a straight line with a roar.

Hate, hate, hate, hate, hate.

The wave of darkness was heading right for Chuuya in the sky.

He held out both hands and formed a black hole of his own. The condensed gravity—the ruler of all creation—was wrapped in a crimson aureole. This, however, was different from the black holes Verlaine had used. Chuuya's black hole rotated at warp speed, then flattened into an oval wrapped in light.

Chuuya raised the rotating vortex into the air and launched it at the incoming black beam. The extraordinary forces collided in the sky.

Gravity is the primordial force that composes this world, one of the four original forces of nature that came into being with the birth of the universe. It is the distortion of both time and space, and the distortion of time and space is synonymous with mass. In other words, gravity is the world itself.

The primitive powers clashed.

The violent impact and shock waves caused the air to explode in spherical bursts. The roads rippled, then detached from the earth and came crumbling down to the ground.

Dazai, some distance away atop the gas storage tank, had to grab onto the handrail to keep himself from getting blasted backward. He covered his face with one arm and cautiously peeked at the battlefield.

“They canceled each other out...?”

The powers collided in the air and disappeared, releasing violet lightning before returning to the nothingness in which it came.

“Ha-ha-ha. It worked.” Dazai’s trembling lips curled into a smirk. “Looks like he was right. Verlaine really did show him how to do this.”

Normally, a collision between two black holes in space would cause them to merge and create an even larger black hole. Chuuya’s black hole, however, was spinning rapidly while generating light in the direction of its rotation. This ring of light was known as the ergosphere. Space-time inside the aureole was being sucked in faster than the speed of light while still simultaneously remaining stationary with respect to space-time outside the aureole—an impossibility that gave the aureole’s interior negative energy.

The negative energy canceled out the energy Guivre unleashed, causing them to destroy each other.

In other words, this was the sole method that could defeat Guivre, an infinitely generating singularity life-form. Only the singularity life-form Arahabaki could devour and destroy the monster.

The beast roared with spite, and Arahabaki gave a thunderous roar back. The colossal demonic beast and the tiny god of destruction began their fight to the death.

As Chuuya’s fist slammed into Guivre’s jaw, the beast’s front leg smacked him with a wave of gravity. Guivre’s roar was like a massive explosion, knocking Chuuya backward. He used gravity to brake in midair, smirking fiercely as blood dripped down his temple. Then he dove forward once more, generating a rotating black hole with both hands before carving up the beast with its negative energy.

Each attack had the power of some sort of mythological weapon behind it. The opponents’ strikes created shock waves that made fissures in the earth, burst the air apart, and blew the clouds away.

Furthermore, every attack tore through the other's flesh without fail, whittling away at their strength. The negative energy of the ergosphere's halo ripped into the demonic beast's body, weakening it with each hit. But Guivre's attacks were generated from the singularity's unlimited amount of energy; there was only so much Chuuya's physical body could take.

Arahabaki's calamitous power was too much for its vessel, Chuuya. His body was bloodied and covered in numerous lacerations, his bones were shrieking in pain, and his right shoulder was dislocated. Both fighters were wounded and damaged—however...

"Chuuya's wounds are deeper," noted Dazai, clenching his teeth as he observed the battle.

A trail of blood followed Chuuya in the air when he howled. Arahabaki was roaring at the humiliation from within Chuuya.

Guivre opened its mouth and generated around twenty black orbs that rapidly swelled almost in conjunction with the beast's breath until they were larger than any black hole so far. All twenty were much bigger than Chuuya's rotating black holes.

"This isn't good," muttered Dazai.

That same moment, banded waves radiated out of the black hole: twenty rays of despair capable of destroying all forms of matter.

The rays dispersed not in straight lines but in a radial pattern like a gaping maw. Half of them tore into the earth while the other half flew off toward the sky.

In the center of its cone-shaped range was Chuuya. The rays gradually engulfed and trapped him inside like the jaws of death. There was nowhere to run. A simple graze meant his life was forfeit.

Arahabaki Chuuya formed a rotating black hole and held it in front of him like a shield just as the twenty black rays struck. They clashed against the ergosphere's aureole, producing a radiant light of particle annihilation.

The energy waves emitted from the annihilation arced backward through the air, razing the earth below. Roads, utility poles, and abandoned cars melted and then evaporated. The sky lit up as if it were already midday.

Arahabaki Chuuya resisted the onslaught. He kept on resisting. He raised his shield and fought back, but Guivre's dark rays were limitless. They showed no signs of weakening. The heat produced from the annihilation began scalding Chuuya's flesh. He vomited blood, and the ring

of black rays closed even further.

All of a sudden, the ring fell apart. All the rays changed course and rained down toward the surface. Bursts of crimson fire bloomed like flowers in Guivre's face.

"Squad Two, fire!" Dazai's voice traveled through the radio. "Don't worry about firing simultaneously! Just shoot as quickly as you can!"

They appeared from buildings, cars, and the street: Countless mafiosi rested massive weapons on their shoulders and fired them at the beast.

They were ground-to-air shoulder-launched homing rocket launchers, the strongest weapon a single person could carry. These were powerful enough to turn aircrafts, tanks, and enemy facilities into dust with a single blast. Lock on the target, pull the trigger, and the homing rocket automatically pulverizes its target into a fine powder. The explosions made by grenades or even grenade launchers couldn't hold a candle to these.

The Mafia had gone through a secret channel to purchase these rocket launchers from an import weapons merchant and create a decent-size fleet. Only a select few powerful skill users could survive a single hit.

But once the smoke cleared, Demonic Beast Guivre was unscathed.

"Don't worry! It's working!" Dazai shouted into the radio. "Just keep distracting it!"

The beast's rays of darkness mowed down the surface in retaliation. The darkness carved into the earth, obliterating the Mafia attackers before they could even scream. But they still didn't retreat or flinch. The surviving members started launching new rockets at the monster.

The demonic beast, an embodiment of energy itself, was not capable of coherent thought. Every movement it made was automatic. It was nothing more than a pool of hatred that attacked anything hostile. That was why it was unable to judge who was most dangerous or which target it should prioritize. Therefore, it focused on the swarm of mafiosi on the surface, and that allowed Chuuya to free himself.

Chuuya floated all alone in midair, bleeding from head to toe.

His body couldn't take much more. Not only would Guivre's attacks overwhelm him physically, but soon his frail body wasn't going to be able to withstand his own powerful gravity, either. Bruises, dislocations, muscle tears, and broken bones—he was manipulating gravity to keep his body together, albeit just barely.

He was the loneliest being in the world. His eyes moved until he saw another lonely being: Demonic Beast Guivre.

Chuuya fell forward, then continued accelerating. He flew toward the demonic beast's chest as if it were drawing him in, piercing its outer gravity—its outer armor—before reaching the turbid stream of time inside it. Waves of raging darkness immediately washed over his body, practically tearing it apart.

Arahabaki howled.

A black hole began to form between his arms almost in an embrace. It spun and increased in size while swallowing the muddy stream, then produced a massive ring of light.

Gargantuan forces led to one annihilation after another. Storms of intense heat, empty space, and time ravaged Chuuya's environs.

He watched as his consciousness was on the verge of fading. Through opening the Gate, his body was already in Arahabaki's control. All he could do was observe the battle. But even then, amid this unfathomable clash between a god and a demon, his consciousness was merely a faint glimmer about to disappear.

The darkness cried.

It sounded as if someone were weeping—the sobs of the loneliest person in the world.

The voice was almost drowned out by the black torrent of hatred. But as Arahabaki's glowing aureole devoured Guivre's energy, Chuuya was finally able to hear it.

Make it end. That was what the voice said.

This monster is the voice of my emotions. Why create someone who wasn't supposed to be born in the first place? With a question that had no answer eating away at me, I came to resent my existence. Being an assassin was the only way I felt alive. I am a pathetic, pitiful soul.

Make this end, my dear brother. With your own two hands. Put an end to this lonely soul—the soul of a man who couldn't trust the world or its people like you do.

I know, Chuuya answered as he gradually faded out of consciousness. You couldn't stand the loneliness. That's why you came to Japan. But that's not a bad thing. You rolled the dice and lost. It was a stroke of bad luck, and you rolled a one. But the pips came out different when I rolled. I was

blessed with wonderful friends. That's all. I could have been in your situation, and you could have been in mine.

Besides, what you have isn't just hatred. You don't actually despise the world. That's why you showed me that memory. You taught me how to defeat Guivre. I'm right, aren't I, Verlaine?

Chuuya thought he saw someone's light twinkling like a star in the depths of the dark storm.

His Gate opened even wider. The spinning black hole grew even bigger. The aureole was now so large that it overwhelmed space itself.

Behind Chuuya, a black gravity control rod appeared in midair on either side of him. It was the beast Arahabaki's tail—a manifestation of the black flaming divine beast.

This time, however, it sprouted from Chuuya's back like a pair of wings.

“Uwooooooooooh!!”

Chuuya yelled while raising his hands into the air, and the swirling black hole instantly expanded in response. Its aureole shone like a supernova, splitting the beast's torso in twain from within.

The flattened, rotating black hole and its glittering aureole dwarfed the beast, filling Yokohama's night sky with a blinding light.

“So that's Arahabaki's—that's Chuuya's true form,” Dazai muttered feverishly as he stared up from the surface.

A pair of hands reaching to the sky. The horizontal ring of light above them illuminating the ground. The fiery black wings on his back. Chuuya's face, eyes closed.

This was the god of destruction's incarnation. The black divine beast.

Guivre began crumbling to pieces as it was drawn into the light. Positive infinity and negative infinity seemed to be canceling each other out. The behemoth was disintegrating, its flesh turning into fine powder that gently floated toward the aureole's center.

Since the flow of time slows down in areas of high gravity, the beast's demise looked painfully sluggish but graceful.

It no longer roared. The beast merely opened its mouth and fell silent, perhaps accepting its fate, before standing perfectly still.

The aureole around its torso swallowed the beast's chest and waist, then its arms and legs, and then finally its head.

It didn't make a single noise.

Its annihilation was tranquil, like the end of a terribly quiet night under the moonlight.

And before long, the aureole's lifespan came to an end as well. The rotating black hole released heat waves as it broke down; the heat intensified as the hole shrunk until eventually it became a giant glowing sphere full of intensely hot rays of light. The black hole was releasing electromagnetic waves while it disappeared.

This second sun that lit up the sky eventually vanished, quietly and delicately. After limply floating in the air for a few seconds, the wings on Chuuya's back vanished, and he slowly began to fall.

Until Dazai caught him.

Dazai's ability to nullify skills activated the moment he touched Chuuya. The self-contradicting skill, which was supporting the energy of the singularity, started to retrogress, weakening the singularity's output. It wasn't long before it returned to its normal state, and the Gate closed. The crimson runes covering Chuuya's entire body slithered away. Eventually, even the gravitational field vanished as well, returning everything to still silence.

"Sleep well, Chuuya." Dazai faintly smiled at him. "I forgot to bring a pen with me, so I won't draw on your face this time. You're welcome."

Epilogue

The tragic event had finally come to an end.

Countless people died, but the incident hardly remained in anyone's memory. It was like a typhoon or a blackout that randomly occurred one day. While the damage was great, few knew the true reason everything happened.

Of course, things turned out exactly how the European government wanted them to. The newspapers claimed that the destruction on the outskirts of Yokohama was the result of a conflict between the Port Mafia, a criminal organization, and an opposing group. They said grenades, rockets, and other explosives had caused all the damage to the terrain. That was it.

Nevertheless, it was only natural that skilled-crime specialists started investigating destruction of this scale—for instance, the military police's Skilled Crime Task Force, the sworn enemy of illegal organizations such as the Port Mafia.

However, the military police's investigation came to a complete stop only a few weeks after the tragedy. It was as if it had drawn its last breath. Everyone familiar with the matter racked their brains, wondering what in the world happened. After all, no one would have been surprised if the military police eliminated the Port Mafia. The Mafia was powerful, but they didn't have enough influence to silence the military police, Japan's most powerful criminal investigation organization. Curious minds wondered what kind of magic the Port Mafia used.

The Port Mafia didn't use any magic, though. There was no need to. Great Britain's and France's public safety agencies had intervened in the Ministry of Justice's decision via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And just like that, the entire event was swept under the rug. After all, the secret weapons of two of the strongest nations in the world clashed and obliterated

each other; the Japanese government didn't want a single crumb of evidence getting out.

Thanks to the efforts of Europe's most powerful nations, only a few members of the Port Mafia were charged, and a good portion of those charges were for petty crimes that simply resulted in fines or suspended prison terms.

And that was the end of the King of Assassins Incident that ravaged the Port Mafia.



Two months after the incident, Buichirou Shirase, former member of the Sheep, was at port, looking at his watch in aggravation.

It was the harbor in Yokohama for passenger boats. Scores of travelers were walking down the pier, coming and going with large suitcases in hand. Shirase stood in front of a boat ramp, constantly glaring at his Swiss watch before looking back toward the port entrance. He was waiting for someone.

Eventually, someone came driving toward the port on a large motorcycle. The crimson motorcycle exited the lane and drew closer, avoiding pedestrians until it stopped right at the end of the pier. The driver got off and approached Shirase.

"Hey, sorry to keep ya waiting."

It was Chuuya.

"'Bout time you got here!" yelled Shirase. "The man who saved your life is about to leave. What took you so long?"

"My bad."

Chuuya took a hat out of his motorcycle's saddlebag and started spinning it around his finger as he approached Shirase.

"You really like that hat, huh? That was his, right?"

"Yeah." After spinning it a few more times, he firmly placed it on his head. "I'd rather not wear my brother's hand-me-downs, but it's got some pretty useful functions. When do ya leave?"

"The boat leaves in five minutes." Shirase checked his watch once more. "Chuuya, you smell like incense. Did you go visiting those graves again? No wonder you were late... *Sigh*. What companionship. You always put

your friends' needs before your own. You carry too much weight on those shoulders. Don't you ever get tired of it all?"

"Half this weight I'm always carryin' is yours, Shirase." Chuuya stopped by Shirase's side. "Besides, that had nothing to do with companionship. I just went to go thank 'em for the bike."

He pointed his chin at the motorcycle behind him. The streamlined bike stood cold and silent.

"Uh-huh. Whatever you say."

Shirase gave a lukewarm reply, then stuffed his hands in his pockets. There was a brief silence after that.

Chuuya looked up at the passenger boat. It was large, white, and old but sturdy.

"Still can't believe you're goin' to London," remarked Chuuya, squinting.

"Wish you were me, huh? A future king needs a big city to set up base, after all!" Shirase gloated. "I learned something from all this. The mechanical detective that died, the king of assassins—they were incredible. I couldn't believe people like them actually existed. The world really is a big place! That's why I'm gonna use the gemstones I stole from the research facility to set up a base in London! The next time you see me, I'm gonna be the king of an organization even bigger than the Port Mafia. I'll make sure to keep a position open for you, Chuuya."

Chuuya rolled his eyes and let out a sigh before shaking his head. "Lookin' forward to it."

The steam whistle suddenly blew, signaling that the boat was about to depart. A woman's voice came over the loudspeaker telling everyone to prepare for boarding.

"That's me."

Shirase grabbed the bags at his feet, then faced the ramp. But right as he was about to leave, Chuuya said, "Be careful over there, Shirase. I'm not gonna be flying over to London to save ya if you try gettin' yourself killed again."

"Ha-ha-ha. You take care, too, Chuuya. I'm not gonna be comin' back to Yokohama to save your ass again, either."

"Yeah, yeah," Chuuya sneered.

"‘Yeah, yeah,’ my ass. I hope you haven't forgotten I've saved your life

twice already: once under the bridge nine years ago and once in that underground research facility pretty recently.”

“You also tried killing me by stabbing me in the back once, too.”

“Two minus one still puts me ahead.”

Chuuya laughed. Shirase did, too.

After Shirase walked up to the ramp, he held out his knuckles to Chuuya, and they lightly bumped fists. After that, they bumped one fist on top of the other, then once again in reverse, before knocking their elbows together and thumping their chests.

That was how the Sheep used to greet each other—it was a secret handshake only they knew.

“Later.”

Shirase and Chuuya turned away from each other and began to walk off. Neither of them looked back even once.

After Chuuya returned to the pier, he was getting ready to mount his motorcycle when a slow-moving black car approached him. As the back seat window slowly opened, someone inside called Chuuya’s name.

It was Dazai. He was dressed unusually for him: a black suit and a tie, the kind of formal attire that a guest of honor would wear.

“You’ve got work in five minutes.”

Chuuya and Dazai stood below the ramp to a luxury cruise ship that must have cost an absolute fortune. The boat that Shirase had just left on couldn’t possibly compare in size or substance. The flawlessly chalky-white ship was without a single smudge; its five floors of cabins had all the trappings of a high-end hotel. Wherever the passengers went, they had seasoned couriers by their sides to guide them. The ship’s navigators had a proven track record as well. This ship wouldn’t rock even a tenth of how much a typical passenger ship would at twice the speed.

The ship’s name: the *Bosverian*.

It was a government vessel for only the highest-level state officials. After the ramp lowered, a group of delegates got off the ship. In the front were bodyguards in black suits who were vigilantly keeping an eye out in

every direction. Each one of them had bulges under their clothes at their sides, making it clear they were carrying pistols.

Descending behind them were bearded men who were clearly government officials. They were seasoned, capable, and had the grayish-brown eyes of individuals whose thoughts couldn't be read. Even their clothes were top of the line.

A man holding a gold and mother-of-pearl cane pushed aside a crew member, who was trying to help him off the ramp, with the tip of the cane—as if he were shooing away a stray dog on the street.

“The noble man-eating fiends are here,” Dazai whispered to Chuuya by his side.

These were high government officials from the UK who had come to conduct a follow-up inquiry on the King of Assassins Incident, which was loaded with state secrets. A major incident such as this one could not end as a simple criminal case, so the officials were sent to Japan to further investigate. The Port Mafia came to welcome and help them with their inquiry, since they had been involved as well.

The Port Mafia, a criminal organization, was meeting with investigators from the British government.

The circumstances were bizarre, but it wasn't completely irrational, and the Port Mafia's boss had his own self-interest in doing this.

First, it wasn't Japan's foreign ministry or even the military police who had been briefed on the situation. It was the Port Mafia. After all, several European governments had completely hid this incident from the Japanese government.

In addition, there was a reason the Port Mafia had to keep a sharp eye on what the British government was doing. They were suspicious that the UK would eliminate any Mafia members involved in the King of Assassins Incident to cover it up and bury any state secrets.

Of course, the Port Mafia wasn't planning on leaking the truth about the incident or any of its secrets, but they didn't know if Great Britain would actually take a criminal organization at their word. Therefore, they sent Dazai to receive them. If the British government intended to eliminate those involved in the incident, then Dazai would have to negotiate and get them to stop. And if he failed, then the Mafia would have to eliminate this inquiry committee before they snuffed them out. That was why Chuuya was

sent with him.

A major multinational dispute involving the Port Mafia might break out depending on what the inquiry committee did.

“Let the game of deception begin,” Dazai said with a giggle as he approached the committee. The bodyguards immediately reacted to his presence and reached for the guns at their waists.

“Thank you for coming all this way to Japan, noble men of the British Empire.” Dazai bowed. He spoke with unusual eloquence and courtesy. “You gentlemen are from the inquiry committee, I presume, yes? May I speak to your representative?”

“‘Representative’?” The bodyguard Dazai was speaking to cocked his head. “These individuals are the inquiry’s engineering advisers, so I suppose that would make Dr. Wollstonecraft their representative...”

Wollstonecraft...?

Chuuya wore a curious expression. That name sounded awfully familiar.

“Oh.” Dazai seemed to have immediately remembered the name. “I’ve heard that name before. That’s the skill user engineer who designed Adam Frankenstein, yes? Hmm... I suppose you’re Dr. Wollstonecraft?”

Dazai had followed the bodyguard’s gaze, then locked his eyes on the oldest, most dignified person in the committee: a man with a shaggy white beard and a receding hairline. Pinned to the man’s jacket were two medals he’d received for his achievements in the military science department.

“Ho-ho-ho!” The elderly man laughed cheerfully when he realized Dazai was talking to him. “No, I am not Dr. Wollstonecraft. I am merely an assistant. The doctor is over there disembarking as we speak.”

Dazai and Chuuya looked over to the ramp the man was staring at. At the top was a massive suitcase simply sitting there with no one holding it... or so it seemed at first.

“Lo there. I’m Dr. Wollstonecraft... Goodness, so this is the country I’ve been hearing about. It’s a lot bigger than it looked on the map.”

A petite individual emerged from the suitcase’s shadow.

“...You’re joking.”

It was a young girl. She had blond hair and wore a white lab coat. Her suitcase was certainly big, but she was incredibly small, hence why it towered over her. Her large glasses covered half her face, and pinned to her coat were over twenty medals only given to individuals for their

contributions to science.

“Hold up...” Chuuya’s face twitched.

“Things are getting interesting.” Dazai grinned.

The young girl carried her massive suitcase—or rather, clung to it—as she dragged it down the ramp with every bit of strength she had.

“Heave-ho! I am—hngh—Dr.—Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley—hngh!” She spoke between grunts, pulling the suitcase along. “Some call me a child prodigy—hngh—but only those who cannot see what lies beneath the surface—hngh. My achievements are thanks to my skill that allows me to design anything I want—hngh. Plus, I’m a genius.”

“You’re not gonna help her with her luggage?” a fed up Chuuya asked the elderly gentleman.

“Ho-ho-ho! The doctor does not take kindly to other people touching her personal belongings.” The man chuckled merrily. “Not even Her Majesty the Queen could lay a hand on those suitcases. If she tried, the doctor would scream and cry like a child, as if she had been sent ten years back in time.”

“Wasn’t she still in her mom’s belly ten years ago...?” Chuuya replied with an annoyed look on his face.

“Besides, she has been really looking forward to her travels here, so she packed all her favorite items in that suitcase. Nobody is getting their hands on it.”

“Old man! Could you stop making me sound like an ordinary little girl? I’m basically a legal adult now. I’m just petite... Hngh.”

After finally making it down the ramp, the engineer wiped the sweat off her brow, then tidied her clothing.

“Pleasure to meet you, citizens of Japan. Now...you must be Chuuya, yes? I heard you took good care of Adam for me.”

The moment he heard Adam’s name, Chuuya scowled.

“I dunno about that,” he then replied. “If anything, he took good care of us.”

The little girl re-centered her large glasses and scrutinized him.

“He sacrificed his life to save mine,” he told her. “Adam was your greatest work, right? Sorry for breaking him.”

“Hmm.”

The engineer wheeled around to Chuuya’s right and observed him before switching to his left and doing the same. She then stood in front of

him and quietly examined him as if he were some sort of intriguing research subject.

“You’re right about that. Adam was my greatest invention,” she replied with her arms crossed. “In fact, I wish I could have continued upgrading him in my lab for the rest of my days instead of having to send him to some rubbish island on an investigation.”

Chuuya listened in silence. His expression made it clear he wasn’t looking at what was in front of him. He was watching a scene from the past.

Dr. Wollstonecraft cleared her throat with a childlike tone. “What makes Adam especially incredible is that he was programmed with intelligence that allowed him to think and make decisions for himself. In other words, Adam decided to sacrifice himself of his own accord.”

She then smiled.

“He must have felt you were worth that much. I trust Adam and the decision he made. I appreciate your apology, but don’t let it bother you.”

Chuuya opened his mouth to say something, but he couldn’t put it into words. He just stood idly by like a child who forgot his way home. Dazai looked at him, then faintly smirked in resignation.

“In fact, I was against using Adam for such a frivolous investigation from the very start,” Dr. Wollstonecraft began in a huff as she crossed her arms again. “The government is always like this. They send a mechanical detective, then blow him up once they’re done to keep any secret information from getting out. All the best trial data comes from these machines’ social interactions with different cultures during solo missions! I suppose this is the government’s way of saying we ought to neglect science in favor of human life!”

Chuuya and Dazai rolled their eyes.

“Bring it here,” Dr. Wollstonecraft ordered. One of her attendants brought over a black tube around the length of an arm. “That’s why I, being the ill-natured woman that I am, created a detachable sub-processor and nonvolatile memory behind the government’s back.”

She then pulled something out of the black tube.

“And installed it in here.”

The arm-length tube was, in fact, carrying an arm: Adam’s right arm that had flown out of the beast with Chuuya and anchored itself into the ground.

“That’s...” It was as if a question mark had appeared over Chuuya’s

head. “I looked everywhere for that after the incident, but I never found it. What’s it doing here?”

“If anything, it’s only natural I did this, innit?”

Dr. Wollstonecraft placed a finger on her oversize suitcase, and it automatically unlocked after identifying her vitals. A man then emerged from within, grabbed the arm, and attached it to his shoulder before saying:

“Would you like to hear an android joke, Master Chuuya?”

Chuuya stood in utter disbelief, mouth agape in astonishment. He eventually took in a deep breath—possibly the deepest he’d ever taken. Then all of a sudden, he cracked a smile...

“Ha-ha-ha!”

...and laughed.



Three days after the engineering advisers and Dr. Wollstonecraft arrived in Japan, the main unit—the European joint inquiry committee—met up with them to conduct a more elaborate investigation.

They especially focused on what remained of the battleground in the woodlands outside of town. After all, that was where the physical fight took place between a singularity weapon and the rampaging Demonic Beast Guivre that clashed and destroyed each other—something entirely unprecedented. During their thorough investigation, the committee managed to obtain valuable records such as interviews and video recordings.

The Port Mafia was cooperative from start to finish. They provided lodging, vehicles, and even chauffeurs whenever necessary. Any equipment the investigation required, they had it delivered. All Mafia members were ordered to cooperate with the hearing investigations.

The inquiry committee even tried looking into the underground research facility N was using, but the Japanese government unsurprisingly refused entry. It was filled with top secret skill research, after all. When politics got involved with the investigation, the higher-ups at the embassy secretly convened to discuss matters, and they made a deal that only Japan had to submit a detailed report on the incident.

The joint inquiry committee reached their conclusion after a month of investigating. Verlaine was dead. After becoming a singularity life-form and destroying everything in his path, he exhausted every bit of internal energy he had and disappeared. There wasn't a single bit of who he was left.

The committee was also surprised that the singularity weapon, the Shell, did not work on singularity life-forms, and they believed this discovery would undoubtedly advance weapon research in Europe even further. The committee, thrilled with their better-than-expected findings, thanked the Port Mafia for their total cooperation, and returned to Europe.

Right after Ougai Mori saw them off at port, he let out a sigh of relief.

"This was utterly exhausting." Mori rubbed his shoulders while watching the government ship fade into the distance. "I thought I was used to dealing with bureaucrats after all those years in the army... Ah, I could really go for a cup of hot tea right now."

"Oh? I had no idea you were in the army, boss."

A woman in a crimson kimono stood by Mori's side. It was Kouyou.

"Ah, I didn't tell you?" Mori smirked ever so slightly at her. "So? Give me an update on the underground shelter."

"No one has entered or exited," she replied, narrowing her eyes. "It appears the esteemed members of the inquiry did not even suspect a thing."

Like a cold-blooded animal, Kouyou curled her lips into a smile even colder than the blade at her hip.

"They have *absolutely no idea* that Verlaine is still alive inside."



Now, we'll trace back time.

Guivre appeared in the woodlands, Adam self-destructed, and Chuuya defeated Guivre through opening his Gate.

Something else occurred four minutes and thirty seconds after that at the elevated grounds of what remained of the destroyed highway. Pulverized foundation, concrete, wire, iron framework, and pipes were scattered about like piles of dead bodies.

Atop it all was Verlaine on the verge of ceasing to exist.

He couldn't even bend his fingers. His breathing was shallow, and his

vision was too blurry to see the stars anymore. Verlaine, who was nothing more than a character set for a seal, had lost his true form—the singularity life-form. The energy supporting his life had dried up, and his heart was close to stopping.

Even Verlaine's thoughts had slowed down just like his breathing. Although the jaws of death were about to swallow him whole, he was completely calm, and he wished for nothing.

So this is death, he thought as his consciousness was on the verge of fading. It wasn't as monstrous as he expected. He did not cry in agony. He did not yell with regret. He did not succumb to fear. It was peaceful and felt ever so empty. Considering the life he'd lived, Verlaine didn't have any regrets now. He should have never even been born in the first place. Nothing in his life was worth regretting.

I did cause a lot of trouble for many people, though: the French government, my assassination targets, the Port Mafia, my brother... And in the end, I gained nothing from it. That was the one somewhat unfortunate thing, like a blemish on the tale of my life.

But no matter; I'm about to die. So forgive me.

The tips of his fingers grew cold until he eventually lost all sensation.

His pulse weakened, and after his body briefly went into convulsions—his heart stopped.

A dozen or so seconds went by.

Verlaine realized he was still breathing. He saw something red out of the corner of his eye and looked toward it.

A crimson cube had penetrated his chest. It encompassed his heart and was stimulating it into beating.

What is this?

Verlaine was confused. Not because he didn't know what the cube was; rather, he was confused because he was all too familiar with it.

Why is this here?

"I have never seen you in such poor shape," said a familiar voice.

Verlaine thought he was hearing things. When he saw the man who had spoken, he thought he was seeing things.

"Oh, come on," Verlaine muttered in almost a whisper. "This is

ridiculous. There's no way you should be here."

"Perhaps you're right," agreed the man. "But spies do appear in unexpected places at unexpected times, yes?"

It was Arthur Rimbaud. He was wearing a thick thermal jacket with a heavy scarf around his neck and rabbit-fur earmuffs over his long black hair and gloomy eyes.

This was the man who saved Verlaine from the laboratory—and his partner as well. And it was the man who Verlaine betrayed.

The subspace that created crimson cubes was a sign that Rimbaud's skill had activated. He could control anything within that space as he pleased.

"Paul, what did you learn during your life as a spy?" Rimbaud asked with a sigh. "How many times did I tell you that you had to rid yourself of emotion during missions if you wanted to succeed? What was the mission? What was the emotion? Were you taking out your hatred for humans on them? Or were you trying to save your brother? You rushed in there without a clear plan, and this is what happened. And to think, you could have taken out the entire human race you so despised, if you hadn't taught your brother how to stop Guivre."

"Oh... Now I get it. You're just an illusion," Verlaine said sarcastically. "You're a hallucination that has appeared before my death. You are the grim reaper that my guilt is showing me. There's no explanation for you being here otherwise. Rimbaud died an entire year ago, after all."

"I am neither an illusion nor the grim reaper. I am a ghost." Rimbaud shook his head. "I was waiting for you in this country."

Verlaine quietly stared at the man as if to uncover what he really was.

"You're not a ghost." Verlaine eventually shook his head, too. "And not because it's unscientific, but because if you were a ghost and not a hallucination, you wouldn't help me like this. You would put a deadly curse on me and finish me off."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I betrayed you. I tried to kill you."

His chilling voice echoed through the night. Rimbaud did not respond but instead quietly gazed down at the collapsed Verlaine.

"Don't look at me like that. Get angry. Hate me. Punch me, kick me, strangle me, Rimbaud!" Verlaine screamed from the ground. "I shot you in the back! I caused that explosion that made you lose your memories and

forget who you were! I'm the reason you died in this foreign country! If you really were a ghost, you would have at least one reason to despise me, Rimbaud! You'd want me to pay for what I did!"

"Actually, it's quite the opposite." Rimbaud shook his head. "I was waiting for you...because I wanted to apologize."

"Apologize"? For what?" Verlaine knit his brows as if he couldn't comprehend what the man was saying.

"I wanted to save you, and I thought I was." Rimbaud bent down and held a hand over Verlaine's chest. "But all I ended up giving you was the unwanted pity of a man who merely pretended to understand. I know simply apologizing is not enough to merit forgiveness. I was always wondering what I could give you in return, and then, on the verge of death, I found my answer. I can give you *this*."

The cube below Rimbaud's palm gradually grew around Verlaine's heart until it expanded enough to encompass his entire body along with Rimbaud's as well.

This was Rimbaud's subspace skill. Inside the subspace Rimbaud could do anything with the exception of bringing back the dead.

But it appeared *this* was the exception.

Verlaine noticed his fingers twitch. He could bend them now. It wasn't an illusion. His eyes moved, and his blurry vision gradually focused.

"You..."

Verlaine moved his arms. Then he twisted his body and sat up. He gazed at his palm, then the back of his hand. He made a fist, then opened his hand. He could feel the blood warming his fingers.

He looked to his side to ask Rimbaud what was going on, but Rimbaud wasn't standing there anymore. He was lying on the ground next to Verlaine.

"What's going on?" stammered Verlaine, overcome with surprise. "Oh... You used your skill...on yourself, didn't you?"

"I can use it only once in a lifetime," Rimbaud whispered with a feeble smile. "But it worked."

The ability to turn humans into skills: That was Arthur Rimbaud's skill.

He could turn the dead into skill-derived life-forms, then freely control them, albeit only within his crimson subspace. Those who were turned into skills would maintain the skills and memories they had while they were

alive and could even use their skills as well. It was a unique skill that went beyond what was thought possible, perfect for a top spy even in all of Europe.

And he had just used that very skill on himself.

“You don’t need to feel guilty. I was already dead,” Rimbaud weakly assured Verlaine. “What you see here is merely data. And yet it is still an extremely gratifying feeling because I get to leave you with this.”

A red light began to shine from Rimbaud’s body. It was something that Verlaine had seen before: redshifting.

“Wait.” Verlaine, realizing what was going on, reached out to Rimbaud. “Rimbaud, wait. Don’t go.”

“You didn’t like the birthday present I gave you.” Rimbaud smiled apologetically. “So I’m giving this to you instead, as a replacement. Happy birthday, Paul. I’m glad you were born—and I’m so glad I got to meet you.”

The subspace cube rapidly condensed until it was sucked into Verlaine’s heart and disappeared.

All that was left were the rubble, Verlaine, and the cool night breeze.

Verlaine took several dazed steps, looked around, then seated himself on top of the rubble.

“Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha...”

He hung his head and let out an empty laugh.

“Rimbaud, you waited an entire year for me just for this? To do something like this...?”

Verlaine realized what Rimbaud had done. He’d turned himself into a self-contradicting singularity to save his friend.

Rimbaud, after turning himself into a skill, used his skill on himself—namely, on a skill-derived life-form. He then once again applied the skill on his new self that came to life, and through repeating this process ad infinitum, he generated a self-contradicting singularity. In the end, he took that singularity and gave it to Verlaine in place of Demonic Beast Guivre.

Verlaine tried to stand, but his arms didn’t have the strength to prop himself up, and he fell to his knees amid the rubble. He was weakening. Perhaps the singularity Rimbaud created couldn’t output power indefinitely, unlike the limitless energy of Verlaine’s past self-contradicting singularity. Verlaine would no longer be able to tirelessly manipulate gravity anymore. And yet he didn’t really care...because he had just lost something even

more valuable.

“Why, Rimbaud?” He gazed at the heavens. “Why did you smile at the very end? I betrayed you, and you died as a result.”

He knew the answer. He just didn’t want to admit it.

Rimbaud, the man who saved me from Pan and gave me the freedom to live.

Rimbaud, the man who trained me, raised me to become a spy, and went on countless dangerous missions by my side.

Rimbaud, the man who so bashfully gave me that hat on my birthday.

“Why did you smile?” asked Verlaine, his voice trembling. “Using your skill on yourself would make you *not human* anymore. You would be nothing more than superficial information with memories and a personality, and you knew that. So why did you wait for me? Why did you do all that for someone you didn’t even know was coming...?”





That was when it finally hit him. He realized why he told Chuuya how to defeat Guivre.

He hated humans. He didn't care if every last one of them were dead. And yet he gave Chuuya a hint on how to defeat Guivre because he didn't think that *everyone* was equally deserving of death.

There was an exception.

There was one person who had changed his mind.

"I'm sorry, Rimbaud," he said in almost a whisper as he clenched his jaw. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I couldn't treat you like the friend you were. I'm sorry I couldn't thank you for the present you gave me on my birthday. And now that you're no longer here... Now I'm just so terribly sad."

Verlaine's voice trembled as he lifted his head to the heavens and closed his eyes. He kept still. For the longest time, he remained there facing the night sky.



Yokohama.

The Port Mafia.

There were as many days as there were nights, and there were as many stars in the sky as there were eyes working for the Port Mafia in Yokohama.

The damage the Port Mafia sustained during the King of Assassins Incident was far from light. They lost weapons, soldiers, and countless skill users who were valuable fighters. They'd caught the attention of the authorities as well. That was why the Mafia had to lie low and keep quiet while they rebuilt their forces.

And it turned out to be worth it. Shortly after the King of Assassins Incident, the Dragon's Head Conflict swept Yokohama off its feet and became the bloodiest eighty-eight days in the history of the city's underbelly. It was a bloodbath that involved every underground organization. The Port Mafia, who was publicly avoiding trouble and focused on consistent, reliable work, managed to get past the early stages of the conflict with minimal casualties. When the conflict came to an end and the underground world had been ravaged, they were able to rapidly grow

their forces like a sapling shooting up after a fire rid the forest of its shady canopy.

The end of the Dragon's Head Conflict helped the Mafia grow and evolve. The rise of Twin Dark, Dazai's promotion to executive, the Laughing Lemon Incident, the war against Mimic that resulted in Dazai's withdrawal from the Mafia, and numerous other events passed until six years later when they clashed with Yokohama's skilled organization, the Armed Detective Agency.

Time is equal to all.

Verlaine didn't die. He survived after Rimbaud granted him life, and he was confined in one of the Port Mafia's underground shelters, something he wanted as well.

There was nowhere left for him in the outside world. He had lost most of his gravity-manipulating skill, which meant the only way he could escape Europe's long, mighty reach was to live in a hideout deep underground. He had no interest in the outside world. There was nobody he wanted to kill or see. The only person he missed was Rimbaud, but he was gone.

At first, Verlaine sat underground while reading and writing poetry. When he got tired of that, he began doing the same thing Rimbaud did: He trained others.

He took the skills and knowledge he had as an assassin and hammered it into the heads of elite Mafia members in the underground training facility: Gin, Kyouka Izumi, and many, many others. Those who studied under him, without exception, became first-class assassins during their brief training.

Verlaine never opened up to anyone. He never told his pupils or even the Port Mafia's boss why he decided to continue living underground, despite how inconvenient it was. When he wasn't training his pupils, he was sitting in his rattan chair as if he were waiting for something. However, he never told anyone what he was waiting for. If someone ever pestered him for an answer, he would simply reply, "A storm." But no one knew what that meant.

Six years had passed, and now Verlaine was an essential figure in the Mafia and one of its five executives.

But nothing had changed. He still continued to sit in his rattan chair,

quietly waiting for the storm.

Shirase had made his way over to London. After living in the slums for a few years, a strange turn of events led him to establish and run a skilled organization called the Stray Sheep.

“I wanna go back to Yokohama,” he would sometimes say, given how intense things were for the skilled community—but it appeared it would be a while before fate released him from European lands.

Piano Man, Albatross, Doc, Iceman, and Lippmann were buried in a well-kept graveyard near the mountains. Their graves were never without flowers.

And yet the five of them were merely a small fraction of the long list of casualties suffered in the Port Mafia—a criminal organization tinged with death and violence. And eventually, they, too, would be forgotten, buried under the ever-growing list of names and the dust of history.

Adam continued tirelessly solving difficult cases and was acknowledged for his countless achievements. However, he still hadn’t fulfilled his dream of starting an all-android detective agency because everyone always told him they didn’t think it was a good idea and stopped him.

But due to his achievements, another autonomous humanoid supercomputer was created: a female AI known as Eve Frankenstein. She had a fierce personality and clearly wore the pants in the relationship, but that didn’t stop them from working together as partners on cases.

As for Chuuya...



Chuuya was riding his motorcycle between rows of buildings. He was heading west on a path to the San’in region.

Small wooden buildings lined each side of the road. It was a street completely disconnected from the bloody world of the Port Mafia. People ambled down the street; white steam rose from a distant building, indicating

that there was a hot spring district up ahead.

Chuuya rode his motorcycle down the paved road until he eventually stopped by a black vehicle. After the car's window rolled down, one of the two people inside called out to him.

"Chuuya, sir, thank you for coming," said the female driver, a member of the Mafia with honey-colored hair. "The target hasn't moved."

"All right."

He looked in the direction the car was facing where a Western-style one-story wooden building quietly stood.

There was absolutely nothing striking about it. A large yet quiet house, it had an old, beat-up sign in the front with the word CLINIC written on it. There didn't seem to be any patients coming or going.

"Chuuya," said the other person in the car: a dark-haired youth in a black overcoat who fixed Chuuya with a piercing gaze. "The boss informed me this was a top secret surveillance mission. Is our target really that dangerous?"

"Pretty sure ya got your answer right there," replied Chuuya, still straddling his motorcycle. "It's top secret."

The young man with the piercing gaze closed his eyes and bowed his head. "I apologize for my presumptuous behavior."

"I'll take things from here. You're free to leave," said Chuuya. "Thanks for comin' all this way."

"Thank you." The young man robed in black bowed his head once more, his face expressionless. "Take us home, Higuchi."

"Y-yes, sir!"

The female mafioso nervously started the engine, then drove off into the distance. Chuuya continued to stare at the house up ahead in silence.

His reputation within the Mafia went through the roof following the King of Assassins Incident. After all, he defeated Guivre, a creature that almost wiped out the entire Mafia, on his own. There wasn't a soul in the organization who didn't know his name, and he now commanded many subordinates. However, Chuuya never spoke about his past or who he really was to his fellow mafiosi.

Dazai was right. After the command log etched inside Chuuya was initialized, there was no longer any way of knowing whether he was human.

Artificial skill-derived life-forms were created by transferring the original skill user's cells to a singularity life-form. In Chuuya's case, that was Arahabaki. That was why artificial skill-derived life-forms were physically no different from humans, and there was no way to differentiate between them through any medical examination. Not even the greatest doctors and biological engineers in Japan could tell if he was merely an artificial being installed with a personality.

But that didn't really bother Chuuya.

Only he could decide when to initialize his command sequence. Even if he could go back in time, he wouldn't change a thing. This body was his. The mind and body couldn't be split apart. His nails, hair, and even the little scars on his body were his, too.

Chuuya took off one of his leather riding gloves and gazed at his hand. *This is my hand*, he thought.

These fingerprints, the faintly protruding blue veins, the wrinkles carved into his palm—even the small scar on the base of his wrist...

It was a small, darkened stab wound. Scars like this one covered his body, which was only natural for someone who'd been through as many battles as he had.

Chuuya quietly stared at the scar. He couldn't remember where it was from. It was actually rare to have a small cut like this, since he could stop any attack through manipulating its gravity. Most of the scars covering his body had been left by powerful skills or surprise attacks, like when Shirase stabbed him in the back. Chuuya believed these small scars were emblems indicating who he really was.

All of a sudden, he felt a presence and looked up. Someone from the house he was surveilling had come outside.

He saw a man on the other side of the tree out front—a middle-aged man with glasses and hunched shoulders. He was wearing a white coat; it looked like he was still a practicing physician.

A woman who appeared to be of the same age and occupation came out after him, dressed in a kimono. After walking by the juniper in the front yard, she took a seat on the wooden bench next to it.

This was the target the Mafia had been after for so long. It took years just to find where they lived without getting caught. The Mafia's boss had told Chuuya all about these people before he came.

The target was this physician who had been living in this region for years and his wife. The husband was now a kindhearted doctor, but that wasn't the whole story. He was ex-military, and he held a post on the town council as well. Put simply, he was not someone who could be taken lightly. The wife herself came from a long lineage of warriors and had all the etiquette and decorum of the upper echelons of society.

They were childless. They had a son long ago, but he passed away. That much was in the records.

He got caught up in a war. He was an unruly child who got in a fight in elementary school with his classmate and ended up beating a kid four years older than him. The classmate insulted his parents, which started the fight. He didn't back down, even though the classmate was older and was using a pencil as a weapon. When the classmate charged at him, he didn't flinch, but instead threw a punch.

When Mori told Chuuya this, he added the following explanation as well:

Pencil lead is made of solid carbon, which is mostly unreactive, so it doesn't change much even after piercing the skin and entering the body. That is why the lead from a pencil stab often remains in the body for years.

That boy had been stabbed in the base of his right wrist.

The exact same place as the darkened stab wound on Chuuya's right wrist.

Chuuya watched the couple. The husband took out a persimmon bundled in a Japanese wrapping cloth. After handing half to his wife, they began enjoying the snack together. The wife took out a canteen filled with tea and poured some into a cup while saying something to her husband. He laughed. Chuuya couldn't hear what they were talking about.

He thought back to the boss's explanation. The bodies of artificial skill-derived life-forms were made from the cells of the original skill user. As a result, there was no way to surgically tell them apart. Nevertheless, there were differences, given they lived separate lives. Various physical disparities were possible—scars, for example.

The original human might have a childhood scar obtained long before

his skill was turned into a singularity. Since the artificial skill-derived life-form would have been created after that, he wouldn't have that same scar.

Chuuya stuffed his hands in his pockets and leaned against his motorcycle, idly staring into space—not necessarily at the couple. He stood by the road in the distance separated by a group of passing cars. There was no telling how long he stood there watching.

Before long, the couple finished their persimmon and went back inside the clinic. Chuuya turned away from them, hopped on his bike, and made a phone call.

“Boss, I finished checking. I’m coming back now,” he reported.

“*Are you sure you don’t want to meet them?*” asked Mori with a hint of disappointment in his voice. “*We finally found them to celebrate your promotion to executive.*”

“It’s okay. The Port Mafia is my family now,” Chuuya replied without even blinking.

He revved his engine once again.

A dry, cool breeze brushed against his cheeks before drifting off into the faraway sky. Chuuya looked back as if he were following the wind with his eyes and turned his gaze toward the heavens.

He quietly stared up at the vast blue firmament. He was looking at something—something that was once beneath this sky—something that was about to happen.

Chuuya found something in that sky. His eyes conveyed as much. He then said into his phone:

“Boss... Thank you.”

He could sense Mori smiling on the other side of the line.

After hanging up, Chuuya put on his helmet and started riding down the street from which he came, facing forward and never looking back again. His motorcycle faded into the vast clear-blue sky, gradually shrinking until he could be seen no more.

End

AFTERWORD

Long time no see. Kafka Asagiri here. How have you been? Did you enjoy my latest novel under Beans Bunko, *Bungo Stray Dogs: Storm Bringer*?

This ended up being much longer compared to the previous novels, the most difficult to write, and it had me groaning the most about how to craft the story during countless scenes. Please line it up on the bookshelf with the other novels in the series if you own them. It's thick. It's massive. Even *55 Minutes*, which was the longest before this one, started its afterword at around page 237. What happened, Asagiri?

By the way, this novel is a continuation of the previous one, *Dazai, Chuuya, Age Fifteen*, released a year and a half ago. That was the prequel. The mysteries surrounding Arahabaki and Verlaine, which were touched on in that volume, are revealed here. While I don't think anyone would read this book first—or at least I hope not—I want to apologize just in case you did.

If you're thinking *So why did you make it so confusing? It's not my fault I didn't know this was a sequel. A decent human being would have called this book Dazai, Chuuya, Age Sixteen*, then yes, I would agree with you because you're right. There is no excuse for what I've done. (The good thing about the afterword is that people can be as angry as they like, but they can't physically punch me.)

At any rate, what I want to say is that if you combine this book with the previous one, it turns out to be an extremely lengthy story. But there's a single reason for why this one ended up so long. Do you remember how I basically wrote in the afterword for *Dazai, Chuuya, Age Fifteen* that this would be the end of the Twin Dark Past Arc? Well, yeah. That's the reason. It managed to be a lot longer than I thought it'd be.

Chuuya's character is an inexhaustible spring. I can't describe the joy I get out of writing such a deep, intricate character and then having everyone read about him. All the same, I couldn't help but worry whether we could

even print a book this long, but here we are. It was accepted and published.

That being said, there are still tales I still haven't finished telling. What battles did Chuuya have to face, and how did he become an executive? What did Chuuya feel, and how did he grow after Dazai left the Mafia?

But for the time being, I would like Chuuya's fate to remain in the palace of imaginations. His destination is still a secret, although there is one thing I can say with confidence: His will not be a peaceful, easy path.

I received a lot of help to get this book published: my partner, Sango Harukawa, who never fails to draw the most unbelievably beautiful and perfect illustrations; my editor, Shirahama, who always proofs my stories and helps me with my schedules no matter how unreasonable I am; the people who printed and distributed this novel, the bookstores, and everyone else who was involved and lent me a hand. Thank you all.

Until we meet again in the next installment.

KAFKA ASAGIRI









Piano Man



Lippmann
Public relations officer

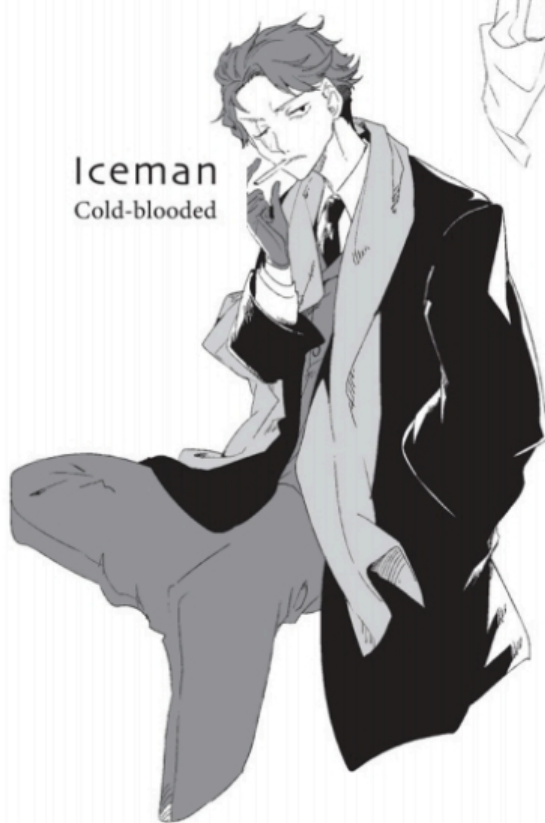
THE FLAGS



Doc
Surgeon



Iceman
Cold-blooded



Albatross
Phoebastria albatrus



